
A BABY BOOM IN BRATISLAVA: EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND CITIZENS' QUALITY OF LIFE IN A SMART CITY

Andrea Čajková

*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Bučianska 4, Trnava, Slovakia*

Tomáš Ruc

*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Bučianska 4, Trnava, Slovakia*

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Abstract. This article critically examines the possibilities and limits of self-government in the field of primary education. The theoretical basis consists of the analysis of relevant legal regulations, thanks to which a logical legal framework is created. Subsequent research involves a practical comparison of the possibilities of self-government in the case of statutory rules of primary education. The aim of the article is to provide a case study of the implementation of school policy from the point of view of the selected self-government of the municipalities of the Bratislava region.

Keywords: *primary school; self-government; decentralization.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *pradinė mokykla; vietos savivalda; decentralizacija.*

INTRODUCTION

The management of primary schools and school facilities is a delegated policy of the State in Slovakia, the practical implementers of which are local authorities – municipalities and towns. Decentralization has been in place for more than 20 years (e.g., Mihalík and Klimovský 2014); it is therefore expected to be a well-functioning system. At the same time, many scientific studies, such as that of Srebalová and Peráček (2022), draw attention to the importance of the effective functioning of local governments in the context of the competences they fulfil and ensuring the quality of life of citizens, which is the basis of the Smart City concept. From the legal perspective, it can be said that the administration of “school

self-government” is contained in several legal provisions, which form a binding framework for local authorities to pursue school policy. Comparing the settlement structure of the Slovak Republic with the existing legal framework in the field of education, the question arises as to whether the municipalities, which are experiencing the permanent growth of their population, are able to respond flexibly enough to the needs of their inhabitants in the field of education. As the founders of primary schools within their jurisdiction, local self-governments are charged with responsibilities such as building new educational facilities or upgrading existing ones where necessary. However, limited competencies often inhibit these bodies from effectively fulfilling their obligations due to various factors, which can be broadly categorized into financial and legislative constraints. In response to the growing number of school-age children, resulting from demographic changes in recent years, many primary schools in districts that are part of the larger metropolitan area surrounding the nation's capital are currently experiencing shortages of classrooms, staff and other basic resources needed to provide quality education. This raises the question of whether this trend will lead to a deterioration in the educational outcomes of the pupils concerned, or have an overall negative impact on their social development. Despite the extensive literature on primary education policy, a research gap has been identified in the form of a lack of research on primary education capacity in the National Capital Region.

The aim of this paper is to provide a case study of the impact of population growth on the capacity of primary schools in the Bratislava region, taking into account the legal possibilities of school founders. The research problem in this case is the need to define the legislative possibilities and obstacles of local governments in the implementation of decentralized educational policies in the context of the demographic development of the territory, taking into account the obligation to ensure the quality of life of citizens, which is the basis of the Smart City concept (e.g., Han and Kim 2021).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to effectively address the baby boom crisis in Bratislava, it is important to first understand its causes and consequences. One factor is the several years of continuous migration to the Bratislava region and the associated trend of suburbanization. As noted by Bezák (2011), the Bratislava metropolitan region is one in which migration played a decisive role in total population growth at the beginning of the 1990s. The region concentrates the majority of interregional migration flows in Slovakia, whether from neighboring or distant regions. According to Podolák and Šveda (2019), municipalities near Bratislava are among the most attractive for new settlers. The available literature shows that the issue of suburbanization has been addressed by numerous authors, such as Jurčová et al. (2004), Podolák (2010), Novotný and Viglašová (2010), Madajová, Michálek, and Podolák (2014), Bleha, Vaňo, and Bačík (2014, 40–163), and Novotný and Pregi (2019). As noted by Korec,

Ondoš, and Bačík (2020), population growth has been strongly influenced by suburbanization. Around Bratislava there is literally a ring of rural villages and small towns which, especially after 1998, emerged when city residents relocated in search of better housing. According to Heriban (2021), suburbanization and population growth also experienced an upward trend during the COVID-19 pandemic. The available statistical data show that suburbanization has also led to an increase in the number of births, which increased by more than 50% in the Bratislava region between 2003 and 2022.

In order to bridge the gap between population growth and the education system, it is necessary to define the educational policy of the state. According to Machyniak (2020, 99–102), education policy can be characterized as a public policy for human development. As Horváthová and Čajková (2018) pointed out, it is a common practice in Central Europe that the state authority is the creator of educational policy. Thus, the prescribed procedures are determined from the central level. As far as policy making is concerned, the situation in the Slovak Republic is the same, i.e., it is concentrated at the central level. It should be noted that the decentralization of competencies to local governments has resulted in a model where the state authority is the policy maker and the local government is the implementer.

Regarding the fiscal decentralization of primary education, the area is addressed by several authors who analyze the development, effects and new challenges in the application of devolved competences. In this field, authors such as Čavojec and Sloboda (2005), Klimovský (2010), Nižňanský and Hamalová (2013), and Bobáková and Rožová (2019) are particularly significant. The current laws and regulations are based on a package of decentralization measures that have been in place for almost two decades. According to Machyniak (2021), the municipality is responsible for all activities aimed at securing the public interest in the cadastral territory of the municipality. According to Miháliková and Koreňová (2016, 122–135), the basic task of the municipality in the field of education is to ensure the necessary spatial and material-technical provision of the educational process in schools and school facilities of which the municipality is the founder. As stated by Bardovič et al. (2019), the area of competence of the municipality in education policy primarily includes the functioning of pre-schools and primary schools, including improving the quality of the school environment and increasing the capacity of educational facilities. Thus, the municipality becomes the main pillar in financing the needs of primary schools. As reported by Mihálik and Klimovský (2014), decentralized regional education in Slovakia was expected to bring about the efficient and meaningful transfer of competences between the state and regional school levels. From the perspective of regional education, the main problem is the funding system, which is unable to enforce the optimization of the school network to make it more financially flexible and efficient. As Horváthová and Čajková (2018) observed, the development of education is the single form of investment that yields the highest rate of return. In the context of global competition, only those countries that consider access to education as an investment of paramount importance can be successful.

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical basis of this paper is an analysis of the legal framework in the field of primary education. The first step is to analyze the transfer of responsibilities to local government. This analysis is then complemented by a synthesis of the legal sources of funding for primary education. The subsequent section then deals with the demographic development of the population in the Bratislava region.

The empirical part of the paper focuses both on the comparison of the inputs analyzed and on the prediction of problems and barriers in the region in the next 5 years. The comparison is based on currently available statistical data processed from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Centre for Scientific and Technical Information – an organization within the structures of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. The comparison is based on two variables – selected groups of children and age. These categories are compared via a simulation of the age category of a pupil in the first year of primary education (Group A) and a pupil leaving primary education (Group B). The aim of the comparison is to compare the number of children entering primary school with the number of children leaving primary school, i.e., handing over their place to future first graders. The data obtained was processed by means of Microsoft Excel. The calculation of the number of missing school places was derived via the following equation:

$$Dy^{1-6} = Ga^{1-6} - Gb^{1-6}$$

Where:

Dy^{1-6} = difference in the number of children entering and leaving school by year;

Ga^{1-6} = number of children in the first year of primary education by year;

Gb^{1-6} = number of pupils leaving primary education.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The legislative framework

The main piece of legislation governing primary education is Act No. 245/2008 Coll., known as the Act on Primary Education, which entered into force in September 2008. The law stipulates that primary schools may be established either by the state, municipalities (self-governments), ecclesiastical authorities or legal entities registered in the Slovak Republic. In order to ensure effective governance of the primary education sector, certain powers and responsibilities are delegated to lower levels of the administrative hierarchy – in particular to regional governments and self-governing units. Regional governments assume delegated competencies over all elementary institutions functioning within their jurisdiction, and are also responsible for the implementation of state policies and programs at the local level. In terms of a positive definition of the need for decentralization,

Nižňanský (2005) argued that a decentralized state can make better use of human, productive and natural potential for the benefit of the population. According to McIntyre, Mitchell and Roy (2023), arguments for fiscal decentralization can be motivated by a variety of reasons, including electoral success, the pressures of regional nationalism, and territorial dissatisfaction with the dispersion of national economic income. As Štrkolec (2019) further argued, the goal of fiscal decentralization is perceived as the concern of the legislature for the fiscal autonomy of local governments. Consequently, as Nordholm, Arnqvist, and Nihlfors (2022) noted, autonomy itself seems to be an important factor not only in financial terms, but also in the case of school governments. The available literature suggests that there is a positive correlation between governance autonomy, strategic decision-making, and student achievement. According to Mihalík and Klimovský (2014), whether an education system, including its content, is autonomous or partially autonomous seems to be a factor influencing the overall positive impression of the decentralization process at the local government level. On the basis of the defined legislation, it can be stated that in the Slovak Republic there exists the decentralization of the formal aspect of education and the partial decentralization of the procedural aspect. However, there are areas (e.g., curricula) that are largely managed from the central level.

On the other hand, the funding of the school system itself can be described as limited. The main obstacle that local authorities face in their efforts to increase the capacity of primary schools in their jurisdiction is funding. Lack of financial resources not only hampers efforts to expand the physical infrastructure, but also severely limits investment in hiring more teachers, which is essential to ensuring a manageable pupil-teacher ratio in the classroom. The basic funding allocated by the state to local governments is set at a precise amount per pupil – the so-called normative figure. The use of the funds defined by the normative figure is divided by law between salaries and operating costs. Salary costs are intended to cover the salaries of teachers, while the salaries of non-teaching staff are financed from the municipality's own budget. In the 2022/2023 school year, the total amount of the normative figure was €1,775.33¹ per pupil per school year. On the basis of the legislation currently in force, it can be stated that the applicable ratio of personal financial costs to operating costs is defined by the legislator at the level of 88.55%:11.45%. On the basis of the above, it can be concluded that normative financing is intended to cover salaries and current operating costs, i.e., there is no reserve for possible expansion or capacity increase.

The demographic development of the Bratislava region

Accordingly, data from the Slovak Statistical Office indicate that between 2010 and 2020, the population of the Bratislava region increased by more than 13%, and the total number of inhabitants grew to more than 677,000. A notable trend that emerged during this period can be termed a baby boom – an increase in the birth rate as a result of various socio-economic factors operating within the society at a particular point in time.

1 For a detailed breakdown see: <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/23433.pdf>

Baby booms often coincide with periods of improved living standards or other favorable circumstances for starting families, helping to create a conducive environment for people living in this region, leading them to expand their families, and resulting in escalated birth rates and accelerated population growth. According to the Statistical Yearbook CVTI (2022), as of September 15, 2022, there were a total of 175 primary schools in the Bratislava region. Of these, 133 are municipal schools, 32 are private schools and 10 are ecclesiastical schools. In percentage terms, almost 83% of pupils attend primary schools established by municipalities.

Forecasting primary school places: a 5-year horizon

Based on the above, a practical forecast of the number of pupils in the Bratislava region over the next 5 years was produced. This forecast provides an answer to the estimated number of new primary school places that will need to be provided. The calculation of this forecast is based on the age structure of children, and compares the number of children entering the first year of primary school with the number of children leaving primary school in the following school year. The forecast was produced for the next 5 years, in which the number of new places needed is given separately for each school year as the difference between the two groups compared. The data obtained are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the projected age structure of children in the Bratislava region – a forecast of the shortfall in places in the next 5 years

School year	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Group A	5 YO	4 YO	3 YO	2 YO	1 YO	0 YO
Group B	14 YO	13 YO	12 YO	11 YO	10 YO	9 YO
Number of children in Group A	9,052	9,190	9,271	8,704	8,508	8,309
Number of children in Group B	6,531	7,067	7,553	7,664	7,811	8,134
Difference/Year	-2,521	-2,123	-1,718	-1,040	-697	-175

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

An analysis of current enrolment trends suggests that these problems will continue to escalate unless immediate action is taken. Based on statistical estimates derived from available data, approximately 8,000 additional seats will be needed over the next 5 years just to provide equal access to primary education for every child in the Bratislava metropolitan area alone; an average of approximately 66 additional classrooms per year. To accommodate such a large influx of pupils, local authorities are required to create 6,845 new primary school places, or 83% of the total demand, based on the current distribution of pupils by type of school. To accomplish this challenging task, these authorities would need significant financial resources to provide the necessary infrastructure development.

Although exact cost estimates may vary depending on factors such as land prices in particular locations, construction costs, and other expenses related to building permits, it is not unreasonable to assume that an average primary school for up to 300 pupils could cost from €4,000,000 upwards. This means that for the municipalities in the Bratislava region alone, the cumulative investment requirement could be in excess of €94,000,000 just to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a municipal school. We can base this claim, for example, on the Ministry of Education's published call for the expansion of primary school capacity (Ministry of Education, n.d.), which sets the upper limit of support for the creation of one new place at €13,750. The problem of the baby boom in the Bratislava region is not an issue that emerged only in the last year. Developments over the last 3 years show that over the period and in percentage terms, the creation of new places appears to be slower for local authorities than for private investors. Over the same period, the number of places increased by 11.17% for local authorities, 0.13% for ecclesiastical schools and 33.14% for private providers. This may indicate the more efficient use of prior capacity or the use of vacant space. The question then becomes: What other options are available to local authorities? It is rather difficult to analyze the spare capacity of local government, but it is certain that if local government decides to increase its capacity by constructing or renovating existing buildings, it will be limited to some extent.

Table 2. The development of the number of schools, classes and pupils in the Bratislava region in 2020–2022

Type of elementary school	2020	2021	2022	2022 v. 2020
Municipal	133	132	133	0
of which number of classes	2,343	2,431	2,531	188
of which number of pupils	51,280	53,698	57,727	6,447
Private	23	27	32	9
of which number of classes	228	278	325	97
of which number of pupils	3,452	4,385	5,163	1771
Ecclesiastical	10	10	10	0
of which number of classes	211	214	209	-2
of which number of pupils	4,871	4,927	4,939	68

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

A partial solution to the emerging problem seems to be the Ministry of Education's call to increase the capacity of primary schools. This is part of the economic stimulus plan, in which founders from the Bratislava region can also participate. According to BSR (2022), 15 projects comprising a total of 3,000 new places have been successful in the current

round of calls. This trend should continue, especially in view of the need to make up for the shortage of places.

One possible recommendation is the possibility of a public-private partnership in which developers of residential subdivisions would commit to building schools, which is an area for further research.

Conclusion

1. This research focuses on the impact of population growth and primary school capacity in the Bratislava region. However, it is also applicable to other regions.
2. A research gap has been identified in relation to the issues analyzed, despite the large amount of literature in the field of education.
3. Demographic trends and the resulting increase in the number of children predict a future problem regarding primary school capacity.
4. The analysis carried out demonstrates the need for the creation of 8,000 new places, which schools will have to cope with within the next 5 years.
5. The call for EU funds seems to be a partial solution, but this funding will not be able to cover all of the capacities that are needed.
6. The optimal solution seems to be public-private partnerships, where private developers expanding housing capacity would also create space for new schools, which would be run by the municipality. However, more research is needed in this area. For capacity reasons, this could not be done within the framework of this article.

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Andra Čajková, Tomáš Ruc

KŪDIKIŲ BUMAS BRATISLAVOJE: ŠVIETIMO POLITIKA IR PILIEČIŲ GYVENIMO KOKYBĖ SUMANIAJAME MIESTE?

Pateiktame straipsnyje kritiškai nagrinėjamos vietos savivaldos galimybės ir ribos pradinio ugdymo srityje. Teorinį pagrindą sudaro aktualių teisinių normų analizė, kuri padėjo sukurti loginę teisinę bazę. Vėlesni tyrimai leidžia praktiškai palyginti vietos savivaldos galimybes, kai taikomos įstatyminės pradinio ugdymo taisyklės. Mokslinio straipsnio tikslas – sukurti mokyklų politikos įgyvendinimo vertinimo modelį pasirinktos Bratislavos regiono vietos savivaldos atvejo analizės pagrindu.

Andra Čajková – mokslų daktarė, Kirilo ir Metodijaus universiteto Socialinių mokslų fakulteto docentė, Trnava, Slovakija.

E. paštas andrea.cajkova@ucm.sk

Tomáš Ruc – magistras, Kirilo ir Metodijaus universiteto Socialinių mokslų fakulteto doktorantas, Trnava, Slovakija.

E. paštas ruc1@ucm.sk

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Dr. Andra Čajková, associate professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia.

E-mail: andrea.cajkova@ucm.sk

Tomáš Ruc, MBA, PhD student at the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia.

E-mail: ruc1@ucm.sk

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