

## **“We Like Going to School”: A PhotoVoice Exploration of Education from the Perspective of Children from Socially Disadvantaged Backgrounds**

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### **Abstract:**

**Introduction:** Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds encounter many obstacles from the very beginning of their school attendance. These challenges affect their experience of school and, consequently, their future educational careers.

**Methods:** A combination of the participatory visual method PhotoVoice and interviews was used to explore this group of children's views on school and education. Twenty-two children in primary education participated in the study.

**Results:** The children who participated in our research perceive school and education positively. School is not only a place for learning but also a place full of opportunities to learn something new, experience success, and receive support.

**Discussion:** It is essential to look at key issues in education from the perspective of children. Creating such opportunities has the potential to lead to social change.

**Limitations:** The main limitation is the small research sample of children attending one school.

**Conclusions:** The role of schools is to find ways to compensate for inequalities in the educational environment faced by children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The PhotoVoice method has great potential in research focused on this target group.

**Key words:** children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, school, education, PhotoVoice.

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## **Introduction**

There is a growing body of research in which children are increasingly seen as full fledged actors capable of communicating their own perspectives on their lives and its various contexts (Luttrell, 2010; Rogers, 2012; Alaca et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2016; Honkanen et al., 2017; Solano Ruiz et al., 2021; McKee et al., 2024; Cambaco et al., 2024). Although this research approach is associated with many difficulties, it offers an opportunity to view the world of children directly, without mediation. It also limits the tendency of experts and decision makers to assume in advance that, as adults, they know children's problems and their solutions (Obrovská & Sidiropulu Janků, 2019). Children and adolescents thus gain a more expert position in relation to their own lives; they are agents and owners of their lives and meanings (Chio & Fandt, 2007). In an educational context, this type of research is particularly beneficial for children and adolescents who are often overlooked or face an increased risk of exclusion. These include, for example, children with disabilities (Sharpe et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2023), migrant children (Sindberg Jensen & Hellesdatter Jacobsen, 2025; Ramos et al., 2025), and children facing poverty (Crivello et al., 2009; Ramji et al., 2024). For this group of children, school is often the only place where they can acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for their future employment (Soylu, 2022). At the same time, it is a place with the potential to at least partially compensate for the inequalities of other environments in which they live daily.

Children's well being is rooted in the social and environmental determinants that surround them, particularly in relation to their home and school (Rogers, 2012). It is therefore essential to address their school experiences and their views on school education to improve its conditions. They are not only subjects of knowledge but, to a large extent, also its mediators. Seeing school from their perspective can help improve the quality of their participation in education and their relationship with school. For example, in the research by Rangarajan et al. (2022), ten marginalised children in India (aged 11-13) expressed three critical aspects in which their school experiences could be enriched: better school and classroom conditions to enhance learning spaces, enhanced school accessibility, classroom pedagogy, and curriculum, and space to act and effect change by learning and becoming.

## **1 Social disadvantage in the school environment - literature framework**

In 2024, 24.2% (in Slovakia 22.6%) of children aged under 18 and 61.2% (in Slovakia 79.2%) of children in the EU living with parents who had at most lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0-2) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2025). In this study, we focus on this group of children,

referred to in the school context as children/pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In Slovakia, a child or pupil from a socially disadvantaged background is defined as living in an environment which, due to social, family, economic, and cultural conditions, does not sufficiently stimulate the development of mental, volitional, and emotional qualities, does not support socialisation, and does not provide adequate developmental stimuli (Act No. 245/2008 § 2, letter o). According to Hall et al. (2019), these children accounted for 3.5% of the Slovak education system in the school year 2018/2019, although the precise figure is difficult to determine due to insufficient data. Children and pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds fall into the broader category of pupils with special educational needs, which constituted 12.3% of all pupils that year. This group includes gifted pupils and pupils with health disadvantages. Although this category is often associated with children from excluded or marginalised Roma communities, this is not always the case. For example, in the school year 2017/2018, according to data from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2020), the proportion of children from marginalised Roma communities at the primary school level was 12.3% (approx. 56,100 pupils), but only about half of them were classified as pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

In Slovakia, more than a third of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds leave compulsory education without completing school (ISCED 1-2). They repeat school years four times more often than the general pupil population, and only every second pupil continues their education after completing compulsory schooling (Methodical Pedagogical Centre, 2016; Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2020). Jerrim and Carvajal (2025) found that the cognitive abilities of bright five year olds from low income families are comparable to those of children from high income families at the end of primary school. The critical period is the transition to secondary school, when children from poorer families tend to lose motivation, get into trouble at school and with the law, begin to fall behind academically, and face a higher risk of mental health difficulties. Gierthlová (2021) suggests that, among children from marginalised Roma communities, differences may also stem from limited early cognitive stimulation due to environmental disadvantage. Although cognitive ability is not the sole determinant of school success, it plays an important role. A 2020 review of expenditure on groups at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2020) found that pupils from marginalised Roma communities are more than five times more likely than the general population to be placed in special education for pupils with intellectual disability.

Hall et al. (2019) note that assessing the needs of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is often 'deficient', with schools tending to attribute difficulties to families (e.g., 'uncooperative parents') rather than recognising systemic or structural barriers (Pikna & Frajštaková, 2019; Svoboda & Mikovcová, 2022). Such assumptions contribute to stigma, missed support opportunities, and ineffective pedagogical strategies. A typical disadvantaged pupil in Slovakia has only a one in eight chance of attending the same school as high achieving peers, compared to one in five in Finland or Denmark (Schleicher, 2019). However, when pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds attend the same school, differences in academic achievement tend to diminish (Crawford et al., 2016). Schools attended predominantly by this target group frequently face lower teacher qualifications and poorer material conditions. Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds thus experience a double disadvantage: one arising from their home environment and another created by the school system itself (Schleicher, 2019).

Šuhajdová (2019) emphasises that social disadvantage is difficult to measure and does not necessarily imply dysfunction, illness, or disorder. Nevertheless, the consequences may be psychological, physical, socio cultural, or socio economic. Their intensity and duration can vary significantly and may develop gradually. Family background, financial situation, parental education, investment in education, participation in extracurricular activities, and housing conditions all influence children's relationship with school and educational outcomes (Soylu, 2022). Children facing social disadvantage are more likely to experience poorer material conditions, poorer health, lower academic achievement, reduced subjective well being, and worse social and emotional outcomes, including lower self belief and lower life satisfaction (Noonan & Fairclough, 2018; Viñas et al., 2019; Clarke & Thévenon, 2022).

## **2 Methodology**

The main aim of the present study is to explore the perspective of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds on education and school. Our intention is not only to reveal how this target group perceives education but also to identify factors that influence their relationship with school. Previous research and studies conducted in Slovakia, particularly quantitative ones, provide information on the position of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds within the school environment. These studies usually draw on statistical data regarding their representation in mainstream or special education, academic performance, attendance, behaviour, completion of compulsory schooling, and continuation of studies in secondary schools (Methodical Pedagogical Centre, 2016; Hall et al., 2019; Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of

the Slovak Republic, 2020). Studies offering the perspective of the children themselves - who are the main actors in education - are rare in Slovakia.

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research design was used, which is suitable for the in depth examination of a specific phenomenon. The main research tool was the participatory visual method PhotoVoice, which is rooted in the critical theory of education, feminist theory, and documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). It is widely considered an effective research tool that encourages children and adolescents to express their views on their own lives (Alaca et al., 2016). Its use is particularly suitable for groups of children who may, for various reasons, have difficulty verbalising their thoughts and sharing their opinions (Wang & Burris, 1997; Luttrell, 2010; Honkanen et al., 2017). Through the camera, the method gives a “voice” to those who are not usually represented in official decision-making processes, allowing them to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of their community (Wang & Burris, 1997). The method enables respondents to express their subjective experiences through photographs and reflective interviews, thus actively participating in the research process. Photographs created within PhotoVoice serve not only as documentation but also as an impulse for deeper analysis and dialogue (Sutton Brown, 2015). According to Harper (2002), the meaning of a photograph is formed primarily during conversation. Like other participatory research methods, PhotoVoice also enables policymakers to be informed about children’s perspectives and has the potential to support social change (Blažek et al., 2015; Sarti et al., 2017). Although its application with children and adolescents is relatively new in Slovakia, existing studies demonstrate its suitability and benefits (Sharples et al., 2003; Světlík & Pauknerová, 2013). The method has been used in a wide range of age groups, from children to seniors, and in communities across all continents (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). The use of photographs in research fulfils inclusiveness criteria, as it reduces inequalities related to social class, culture, ethnicity, or language use (Chio & Fandt, 2007). In our research, we chose a combination of visual and verbal methods, which allowed us to gain a broader view of children’s school education and answer the research question.

Research Question: How do children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds perceive education and school?

The research sample consisted of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds attending primary school in a village with fewer than 4,000 inhabitants in western Slovakia. The school’s pupil body is 97% Roma. For selecting children, we relied on available data (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2020), which indicate that 58% of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are from marginalised Roma communities, and conversely, only 55% of children from marginalised Roma

communities are formally classified as pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. We conducted the research with children in the second (N=9) and third (N=13) grades of primary education, in total 15 boys and 7 girls. The average age of the group was 9 years. The sample also included two children with special educational needs. The children were divided into 10 subgroups, each consisting of two or at most three children. Each group was given access to a camera on the researcher's mobile device. The research was conducted during class time, as few of the children attended the school club. The class teacher was always present in the classroom together with the researcher. The researcher (the second author) explained her presence in the classroom, introduced herself and the topic, the assignment, and the technical and ethical conditions associated with taking and selecting photographs. Owing to her experience with a similar target group, she quickly established rapport with the children and created a safe space for sharing. The children were asked to take photographs of people, places, or objects representing what education and school mean to them. After the photo session, the children were asked to select a maximum of five final photographs from their group. They were instructed to imagine that they were reporters wishing to convey an important message on the topic.

The researcher subsequently conducted interviews with them about these photographs. The SHOWeD analytical tool, developed by Wang and Burris (1997) for use in PhotoVoice, was applied during the interviews. SHOWeD promotes critical thinking and has the advantage of being simple and comprehensible, allowing marginalised groups to participate (Jurkowski, 2008; Guerri, 2019). It consists of five content rich questions: What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this condition exist? What can we Do about it? The researcher also added other relevant questions to capture children's interpretations reflected in the photographs. This approach follows the three phase analytical process proposed by Wang and Burris (1997): selection (choosing photographs that best reflect needs and assets), contextualisation (discussing what the photographs mean), and codification (identifying themes or issues emerging from the narratives). Data were collected between January and March 2025. Consent to collect and publish the data for research purposes was granted by the school management. Interviews accompanying the photographs were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data were anonymised.

The 38 photographs, along with transcripts of the interviews, were analysed by both authors of the study using a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis based on a six step process. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, and describing themes occurring across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The phases include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and

naming themes, and writing up. The cloud based application Dedoose (Version 10.0.25) was used for analysis. Byrne (2022) notes that thematic analysis is not strictly linear; it is iterative and requires researchers to revisit earlier phases when necessary. The photographs were analysed on two levels. First, an analysis at the level of denotation focused on what was literally depicted. Based on this, the photographs were divided into 10 groups (Table 1).

Table 1

*Frequency of themes of children's photographs*

<u>Objects/People Photographed</u>	<u>Number of occurrences in 2nd grade</u>	<u>Number of occurrences in 3rd grade</u>	<u>Total</u>
teacher	2	2	4
school classroom	4	6	10
school supplies	2	6	8
classmates	4	1	5
own person		2	2
school equipment		3	3
toy	1		1
class mascot		1	1
snack	1		1
own creations	3		3

The second level considered connotation, where we examined what the depicted objects or individuals represented, revealing deeper meanings supplemented by children's verbal explanations. For example, in Figure 1, the denotation is a pupil's drawing displayed on the classroom board. To explore the connotative meaning, the girl was asked why she had taken and selected this photograph. She explained that she enjoys drawing and painting and is able to do so at school. She added that she was pleased her artwork was displayed on the bulletin board. When asked whether she also draws at home, she replied that she does not have watercolours or crayons at home - only at school.



Figure 1. A pupil's drawing displayed on the classroom board.

Similar photographs may therefore carry very different meanings (Samonova et al., 2022), which is why exploring children's motivations for taking and selecting photographs is the most critical part of implementing PhotoVoice (Zaman et al., 2025). Tsang (2020) argues that, to avoid distorting participants' interpretations, researchers must carefully balance their own interpretations with those of the participants. The interpretation of photographs is also influenced by the viewer's cultural context and life experiences (Rania et al., 2015). For this reason, the initial deductive coding was based on the photograph themes, and sub themes were subsequently assigned inductively based on the interviews. We supplement the analysis with authentic statements from the children, marked with the abbreviations (G - girl, B - boy), and with sample photographs.

### **3 Results**

This study examines the views of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds on school and education. Children in the second and third grades of primary school created photographs, which were then discussed. Through analysis, we identified three key themes that reflect this group of children's views on school and education: the perception of education and school as an opportunity, the importance of the classroom (which represents a microcosm for children within the school environment), and the figure of the teacher. We discuss these in the following subchapters.

#### *3.1 School and education as an opportunity*

Pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter obstacles at the beginning of their school career that affect their subsequent relationship with education. Frequent failures, absences, and early school leaving often lead to a negative attitude towards school and a feeling of exclusion from the education system (Machin, 2006; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019; Clarke & Thévenon, 2022). In our research, we did not encounter a prevailing negative perception of school and education among children. The children's photographs captured school supplies such as textbooks, notebooks, blackboards, own creations, completed projects, and specific parts of the school (e.g., chairs in the hallway, portraits of famous people). At a denotative level, the content of these photographs depicts the physical space and objects that are simply part of education. They are essential for learning and education, and it is not surprising that they appear in the photographs. However, the children's statements suggest that they carry a deeper message. They present the school as a very important place for this group of children. It is not only a place for learning but also an environment that provides them with opportunities for social interaction and a sense of achievement. The school gives them the opportunity to:

- experience success - *“We learn and enjoy drawing. We are proud of our work.”* (B)
- acquire new knowledge (Figure 2) - *“Mom learned new things too. She didn’t know before. But we read the textbook together, and then we did this.”* (B talks about a school project)
- access resources unavailable at home - *“Textbooks, because we learn from them and it’s important to have something to learn from. We don’t have many books and textbooks at home.”* (B)
- relax (Figure 3) - *“It’s such a relaxing place and it’s quiet there. I like going there, I don’t have such peace and quiet at home as I do on those chairs.”* (B)
- satisfy basic physiological needs - *“When we’ve eaten, we learn... better than when we’re hungry.”* (B)
- get support and help - *“He’s so sad when he does his homework at home and no one can help him because they don’t know how. So we took a picture of him.”* (B)
- achieve something - *“We have a nice school, and we like Slovak and want to learn better than our parents.”* (G)

The families of these children are often unable to provide them with everything they need. This aspect appeared frequently in the children’s statements. School is an opportunity for them to compensate for, or at least mitigate, shortcomings associated with the environment in which they grow up. This is not just about material security such as textbooks, books, or meals, but also about the support that parents are often unable to give their children for various reasons. If this aspect is addressed and the school is aware of how the home environment affects a child’s performance at school, it is possible to create a supportive environment that will benefit both this group of children and their families.



*Figure 2. School project made with mom.*



*Figure 3. Seating area in the school hallway.*

Based on her research with teachers in Turkey, Soylu (2022) found that the compensatory function of school for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds operates by involving pupils in school life. Teachers do not place additional burdens on families with school obligations, and the form of support is rather individualised and specific. The children in our research perceive school positively and emphasise their desire to tell others about it, to demonstrate that they are motivated to attend school and learn - *“We want to be able to read and write better than our parents.”* (G) At this point, the power of the PhotoVoice method became apparent, as the children became active participants in communicating their experiences to the outside world (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Butschi & Hedderich, 2021). They regarded the photographs they took as an opportunity to show their relationship to school and education: *“...that people would appreciate that we are learning, that we can read and write.”* (G) Rarely, there were also responses that spoke of failure or a desire to escape from school, especially in situations of failure. Photographs capturing this category of children’s statements showed a boy in the toilets where, in his own words, he escapes when he does not know something or does not want to do something. Another picture showed a window symbolising the world outside school: *“Sometimes I would rather not go to school and just be outside all day. You know, sometimes I don’t know how to answer. I didn’t study properly for today either. I just didn’t study, I spent the whole weekend chopping wood with my dad.”* (B)

### *3.2 Teachers as key persons*

Teachers in primary education, but also at other levels, play a crucial role in shaping children’s attitudes towards learning, school, and education as such (Spilková, 2004). This relationship carries over into their subsequent educational careers and paths. From this perspective, teachers are truly key figures who can

win children over to school, but unfortunately, they can also lose them (Quin, 2016; Allen et al., 2021). The children emphasised the importance of the teacher in their photographs and statements. At a denotative level, these are photographs of the teacher at her desk, leaning over a group of children while explaining something, or at the blackboard. At the connotative level, however, it is not only about capturing her professional and didactic competences but also about emphasising her socio psychological competences, such as the ability to create positive emotional bonds, empathy, or providing appreciation. According to Cai et al. (2023), teachers' empathy is directly related to reading outcomes and indirectly through pupils' sense of belonging to the school. If pupils feel welcome at school by their teacher, if the teacher has a respectful relationship with them, and they know that they are learning, this builds a stronger relationship with the school (Ellery, 2019).

The marginalisation of Roma children in school is a fundamental issue and is closely linked to stigmatisation, low expectations from teachers, and a lack of recognition of their identity and achievements (Hall et al., 2019; Némec, 2020). The children in our study emphasised the teachers' efforts to find ways to help them improve, discover their talents, and not give up. They feel genuine interest in them as individuals and in their progress, which apparently supports their positive perception of school and education as a whole. As other studies have shown, good relationships between teachers and their pupils are associated with higher pupil engagement in school. This is reflected in academic performance, attendance, elimination of disruptive behaviour, expulsion from school, and interruption of school attendance (Quin, 2016). This clearly points to the role of teachers as mentors and guides (Cashman et al., 2025).

*“The teacher is very important at school, and how she explains things is important.” (B)*

*“The teacher found out that I can draw well and she praised me, saying I was talented.” (G)*

*“And it’s easier to do maths at school than at home because the teacher is there and can help me when I need it. At home, no one knows how to do it, and sometimes they even yell at me.” (G)*

### *3.3 The classroom: Our space*

The classroom is a microcosm for children within the school. It represents a safe space, created not only by the objects that belong to them or that they have created but also by people. Positive school interactions and experiences, which are a key element of children's social life, contribute to their positive social and psychological development (Pervez & Galea, 2024). Just as the children in our study had a positive perception of school and education, they also spoke positively about their classroom: *“That’s why we took a picture of the classroom,*

*because it's very good in this classroom.” (G) They took photos of their classmates, the class bulletin board, and, in the case of third graders, the class symbol (Figure 4) - “Our class teacher gave us the name ‘tigers’ because we are strong, and she also said that we are persistent.” (B)*



*Figure 4. The “tigers” class.*

Children shape the classroom according to their own ideas. They also bear a certain amount of responsibility for its appearance: “*We have a nice board and we made it ourselves!*” (G) The classroom is therefore more than just a place for learning (Uline et al., 2009). It is also a place where their identity and group belonging develop, building a sense of ownership: “*Yes, that's why we took a picture of the classroom, because it's very good in this classroom.*” (G) Zaman et al. (2025) emphasise the need for a stable and personalised learning environment that has the potential to increase feelings of safety and belonging. If a school or classroom is a safe environment, it has a major impact, especially on children who experience adversity at home, a lack of interest, or grow up in chronic stress (Krnáčová et al., 2024).

#### **4 Limitations and recommendations for future studies**

The research had several limitations that affect the generalisability of the results obtained. Although their contribution is undeniable, they should primarily be viewed as an initial probe into the issue. Our results may be relevant for groups of children in similar conditions or with similar school characteristics. However, the research sample was small and came from only one school in western Slovakia. It would be necessary to visit schools in several locations, with an emphasis on schools with both high and low prevalence of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. We are aware that the perception of school and education by children themselves, especially in primary education, is fundamentally influenced by the class teacher and the composition of the school

class. Another limitation of the study is the relatively short period during which the research was conducted. Although our goal was to include all children in the classes observed, we were only able to collect data from pupils who were present at school during the research days. Children who were absent from school during this period could not participate, although their perspectives may have provided different findings. We also believe that the PhotoVoice method and its potential deserve greater attention in the Slovak context in the future, not only from a research perspective but also from an educational one.

## **Conclusions**

Through the participatory visual method PhotoVoice, twenty two primary school children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds were given the opportunity to express their subjective experiences with school and education. The results show that the children evaluate school and education positively. Their statements provide convincing evidence that they consider institutionalised education to be an opportunity for their further advancement. They are motivated to learn. They emphasise the key role of the teacher and the importance of their own school class, which consists not only of a specific space and subjects but also of people. Their statements highlight the contrast with their family background, which is often unable to sufficiently meet their needs, making school the only place where shortcomings in their home environment can be compensated for. It appears that the role of the school is not to be neutral, and certainly not to worsen the already difficult situation of these children. The role of the school is to level the playing field.

The study also highlights the potential of the PhotoVoice method in this target group. Despite the demanding data collection process, which included taking photographs and conducting interviews, the method gives children the opportunity to communicate their views to those who have the power to change the existing situation. The goal should be to take measures that consider each school in terms of its own internal dynamics as a whole and that aim to understand its specific needs. This can help reduce the differences in education between advantaged and disadvantaged children, regardless of the cause of such disadvantage.

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