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Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM): Round 1

Exploring the Czech Roma Child’s Experience of Multimodal Literacy Learning & Networking at Charles University in Prague

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to summarise the process and initial outcomes of the networking and research initiatives funded by the Cost Action IS1410: DigiLitEY’s Short Term Scientific Mission that took place between 15th February and 15th April 2016 in the Czech Republic. The first part of the report focuses on the networking activities held at the host Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University (CU), whilst the second part discusses the holistic and phenomenological research exploring the Czech Roma children’s media and learning experience relevant to their digital literacy.

Institutional and International Networking at Charles University in Prague

The networking activities at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism (ICSJ) were focused on initiating internal institutional cooperation between CU’s faculties as well as an international cross-institutional partnership between CU and Bournemouth University (BU). Although originally separated, these activities have ultimately blended into one key initiative for developing and establishing media (literacy) education as a nationally recognised study programme, which would then be offered as BA and MA degrees by the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education (both at CU) and as a double or joint MA degree between CU and BU.

Although The Child Research and Impact Group (CRAIG), aimed at fostering interdisciplinary collaboration across CU in sharing and creating new knowledge by researching and impacting children’s multimodal literacy learning and development, has not been officially established yet, its working group is already actively cooperating on the programme’s accreditation. This group brings management and teaching staff, ranging from established professors to early career researchers, together with doctoral researchers from two faculties at CU. This is a key moment in the history of Czech media education, as even though the field of media literacy was originally established by ICSJ, it is the Faculty of Education that has a great potential to reach out to current and future teachers working with pre-school and school children, which is also supported by the DigiLitEY.

If successful, the accreditation process will allow any Czech public university to open study degrees combining the field of education with media studies and therefore offer a variety of bachelor, master and doctoral programmes in, for example, digital literacy of children, while being consistent with DigiLitEY’s aims and values. Such a programme and its degrees could therefore play a crucial role in informing future research, policy and practice in media and emergent digital technologies relevant to young children as well as in identifying best practices in digital and multimodal literacy learning and teaching in the Czech Republic and beyond. However, this is a long process that requires careful preparation of all necessary documents, on which the group is currently working. Moreover, there is a
difficulty in that the accreditation laws have recently changed in the Czech Republic and that the new committee will only be established in autumn 2016. The overall hope then is that the new degrees could potentially be offered from September/October 2018 or in 2019.

One of these programmes would be, as mentioned earlier, a double master’s degree with the working title MA/Mgr. in Children’s Media and Literacy offered by CU and BU. In fact, it was this idea that led us to the realisation that it is not currently possible to open media education or media literacy related programmes in the Czech Republic, as these could not be positioned under the umbrella of the recognised fields of education or media studies. Consequently, we have been forced to work on both accreditations alongside each other, which is where the STSM award’s networking activities became a single complex initiative.

The development of an international double degree between CU and BU, and thus between British and Czech HE institutions, represents a challenge due to the distinct educational systems. For instance, the master’s degrees at CU are generally free of charge, last for two years, require 120 ECTs and are completed by a dissertation and state exam, whereas MA degrees at BU are paid, last one year, require 90 ECT and are completed solely on the basis of dissertation. Together with these technical and operational issues, we have been trying to figure out the programme’s curriculum, particularly what would be delivered by BU and what by CU, and how the final projects would be co-supervised and what virtual environment would best support this teaching, mentoring and learning cooperation. In addition, there is a possibility to apply for Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in the future in order to change the double to joint master’s degree.

Even though the actual accreditation and opening of the new degrees lies in the relatively far future, there is no doubt that the STSM award contributed to the establishment of an interdisciplinary network and partnerships between the Faculties and the Universities, as well as the beginning of the preparation process. Moreover, although the STSM award finished in April 2016, I have been offered an extended work agreement at CU, which will allow me to carry on with these initiatives. To be involved in the accreditation process and to lead the international negotiation represents a beneficial learning experience and a significant milestone in my career development as it allowed me to experience academic life in its variety and complexity, going beyond teaching and researching and thus generating and strengthening my position among leading early career researchers.

Exploring the Czech Roma Child’s Experience of Multimodal Literacy Learning: Without Dreams and Ambitions There Is No Digital Literacy

Although the Roma people represent Europe’s as well as the Czech Republic’s largest ethnic minority (European Commission 2016), the rights of Roma children are considered to be continuously violated by distinct parties involved in their lives. The Open Society Foundation’s report No Data – No Progress (2010, p.9), developed under the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015), argues that the ‘lack of data on Roma communities remains the biggest obstacle’ in gaining understanding and effectively impacting their real life situations. The report also suggests that a ‘better knowledge of the Roma world is necessary for breaking the vicious circle of ignorance and prejudice: ignorance generates prejudices, and prejudices foster ignorance’ (ibid.). Cicciarelli (2015) adds to this that ‘it would be
desirable [...] that in the future we try to address the issue of data collection in a more thorough, sociologically refined way than we have until now, in order to obtain all the necessary elements for devising involvement strategies for the Roma communities and improve their standards of living, while at the same time safeguarding the fundamental values of their ancient and unique culture’ (p.8). The research introduced here attempts to contribute to this approach while exploring the Czech Roma child’s experience of multimodal literacy learning with specific focus being on media and digital technologies.

**Research Methodology, Methods & Participants**

The research applied a holistic approach treating ‘the child’ as a whole being and becoming, addressing the child’s literacy in its cognitive, sociocultural, emotional, civic and creative complexity, as well as exploring ‘any’ media currently or potentially relevant to the participating child’s complex literacy learning. Instead of trying to artificially cover all modes and dimensions of learning, the research has been phenomenologically guided by the child’s media and learning experience rather than by pre-set research questions (Woodfall and Zezulkova 2016). The child’s experience has led the research towards the contextually relevant information together with the concrete aspects of the whole; aspects that are arguably relevant to the child’s literacy learning in the context of digital, interactive, converged and personalised technologies. This methodology, specifically designed for researching and capturing literacy experiences of the whole child, represents a partial contribution of this research to the DigiLitEY’s objectives.

This holistic and phenomenological research consisted of observations at participants’ homes and in their communities and informal educational settings, as well as interviews with parents/guardians and social workers, and informal chats with, and guided tours by, children. The combination of interviews and observations, common in childhood and educational (see e.g. Bondy 1990; Lindsay 2007) and media literacy (e.g. Buckingham 2013a,b) studies, allowed me to gain understanding from the insider’s ‘emic’ standpoint of and the outsider’s ‘etic’ perspective (Fetterman 1998). A total of ten full days were spent doing observations, alongside which three social workers, five parents, two grandparents and nine children were informally interviewed, with four of these children additionally giving a guided tour. The guided tours around their home or educational setting led to contextually rich conversations that developed and strengthened relational understanding (Everett and Barrett 2012). Only less than half of the conversations were voice recorded, in total thirteen, with most of the observation, interview and conversation notes being hand-written as they were acquired ‘on the move’ during the guided tours and when partaking in the participants’ lives (e.g. eating family lunch, going with family to a fair, playing with the child, picking the child up with his/her mother from school, etc.).

Yet as Gold (1958) criticised, the contact was arguably ‘so brief, and perhaps superficial’ that the research could be accused of misunderstanding the participants and being misunderstood by them (p.221). This danger could be seen as even greater due to being previously unknowledgeable about the life of Roma minority in the Czech Republic, however, this open approach bracketing out any assumptions – that lies at the core of phenomenological research – has allowed me to sincerely treat the research participants as experts on their own lives. The holistic approach then supported this by allowing the participants to talk freely about what was important and relevant to them in connection to their or their children’s childhood, education and media experience – separately as well as in connection
to each other. The adult participants were made aware that I did not have any knowledge about Roma issues whatsoever and that all the reading was to be done only once they and their children had directed me towards relevant information. The logic of starting with their actual lives and only then moving into abstract thoughts was approved by, and well-received among, the research participants. Yet as I began to be more aware of the emerging themes from one research day to another, each research session became more targeted and reflective, exploring whether the newly acquired beliefs grounded in the previous observations and conversations had been fully understood.

The research participants were allocated and approached through two main channels; [1] a non-profit organisation operating in a large city and providing social services and other supportive activities to Roma families in need found with the help of the Open Society Fund Prague, and [2] a special school situated in a small town in which the majority of the students used to be of Roma ethnicity (which was not the case anymore) directly approached by me. The first organisation runs a child day care that serves as an informal educational centre, whereas the second institution represents a formal educational setting – thus addressing DigiLitEY’s interest in both informal and formal learning. The institutions were asked to choose families with one or more family members who are under nine years old, in which at least one parent considers himself/herself to be of Roma ethnicity or nationality. The school as well as the non-profit organisation additionally helped in explaining to the families the research and their rights within it, so all the ethical and legal issues could be appropriately covered.

The special school, here called Formal Learning Institution (FLI), arranged a meeting with three former students who had children of pre-school age. Although all families initially agreed, in the end only one participated. Mirka (Roma) is married to Zdenek (non-Roma, 20 years) and they have a 4 year old, Michal, and are expecting a baby. Mirka receives maternity benefit (that can be received until the child is four years in the Czech Republic) and her husband works. The family lives in a prefabricated apartment building (representing the heritage of socialist realistic architecture, called ‘panelák’ in Czech) in a two-bedroom flat. The building serves as a small Roma community home and thus Mirka’s grandparents as well as her brother Andrej (Roma, 22 years), married to Zdenek’s sister Jana (non-Roma, 23), who has with him a four year daughter Lucinka, also live in the same building. Although the main research focus was on Michal, the rest of his family including Lucinka had taken part in the research and subsequently gave spoken permission to be included in the final report. In Lucinka’s family, Jana works and Alex receives social security benefit and they live next to Mirka’s family in the same size flat. Lucinka attends a public kindergarten and so will Michal once the baby is born. These are Families 1 and 2.

The non-profit organisation, here called Informal Learning Setting (ILS), that ‘strives for equal opportunities for Roma in the mainstream society’ (author’s translation of the anonymised organisation’s website), identified a number of families who agreed to participate. The level of their participation was nevertheless constantly unclear and uncertain, which led to the decision to include more than the two families initially planned. In the end, five families connected to ILS – or to be more precise, five middle-aged mothers and some of their children – took part in the study. One of these mothers was also a social worker at the organisation, being one of the three social workers from ILS (the other two being non-Roma females Terka (SW1) and Lenka (SW2) who participated in the study).

In Family 3, both parents are working, their children Natalka (6 years) and Honza (7 years) go to private Waldorf School and the family had moved out of a Roma community to a three-bedroom apartment in the middle class city centre a few years before. Natalka and Honza’s mother, Alena, used to be a client
at ILS, where she now works as a social worker leading the child day care. Both Honza and Natalka had a pre-school education, Honza in a public (mainly Roma) kindergarten and Natalka in the Waldorf kindergarten.

*Family 4* lives in a three-bedroom house in an arguably poorer neighbourhood, which however is not a Roma community. The father works and the mother, Helena, receives maternity benefit. They have seven children of ages ranging from a few months to ten years. Although the parents have a history of drug abuse, their social worker Terka (SW1) suggested that this had passed and that the family’s living situation has greatly improved. The five pre-school aged children used to regularly attend ILS child day care before the last baby was born. Helena explained it was difficult for her to carry on commuting with a new born baby and five children under six years of age, as the family now lives an hour by bus away from the day care. The oldest son goes to an elementary school, but Helena has decided to send him to a special school next year as he was failing all subjects.

*Family 5* includes four children from 8 months to 8 years of age, two of which are regular visitors to ILS day care, whilst the oldest attends (mainly Roma) primary school. The mother, Helena, receives maternity benefit and the father is on social security benefit. The family lives in a one bedroom apartment situated in one of the city’s worst Roma ghettos (*Photograph 1*), yet still not in the worst one. No other contextual information is known about this family.

*Photograph 1* Roma ghetto

*Family 6* lives in a two-bedroom apartment in a Roma community. The non-Roma mother, Petra, is married to a Roma ex-convict who had recently been released from jail. Together they have three children, two boys – who I did not meet – aged 10 and 11, who attend a (mainly Roma) elementary school and who occasionally spend a few months in a children’s home, as well as a five year old daughter Marika. Marika mainly stays at home and helps to take care of the fourth, only a few months old, child that Petra had with her partner with whom she had lived before her husband returned. None of the parents work, receiving maternity and social security benefits, and there is a suspicion of ongoing drug abuse and possibly domestic violence.
The last *Family 7* has four children from ages 4 to 14, but I have only met 4 year old Janča and her 9 year old brother, Ríša. Ríša goes to a (mainly Roma) elementary school and he spends most of his free time practising hip hop at what is called a ‘low-threshold’ non-profit organisation offering afterschool activities for socially disadvantaged children. Janča has visited ILS child day care every day since she was a baby. Both parents do not work and they receive social security benefits. The mother, Veronika, has been ILS’ client for almost eight years now and although there is a will to provide better for her children, she is supposedly dealing with her husband’s drug and gambling addictions. The family lives in a flat that is just one room with a cooking stove, but no hot water or bathroom.

*Table 1* below provides a more transparent summary of the participants and their research involvement that, as already mentioned, greatly varied among the individuals as well as the families.

*Table 1 Research participants and methods in which they partook*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Child / children</th>
<th>Mother/Father</th>
<th>Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Roma/Non-Roma</td>
<td>Michal (4 yrs)</td>
<td>P1 Mirka</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Roma/Non-Roma</td>
<td>Lucinka (4 yrs)</td>
<td>P2 Andrej</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Natalia (6 yrs)</td>
<td>P3 Alena</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Hozna (7 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Malý (10 yrs)</td>
<td>P4 Pavla</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Anna (5 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Petr &amp; Pavel (3 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Marek (2 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Radim (3 months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Barča (6 yrs)</td>
<td>P5 Helena</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Roma/Non-Roma</td>
<td>Marika (5 yrs)</td>
<td>P6 Petra</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Janča (4 yrs)</td>
<td>P7 Veronika</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>Ríša (9 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to clarify here that although the research purposefully sought variety within participants, not representativeness, there is an obvious underrepresentation of Czech Roma families from middle and higher classes and parents with higher education degrees. When conducting the field research, a number of new contacts that would allow the inclusion of such families emerged, however, research with them could not be carried out due to the limited time-scale of this award. On the other hand, this limitation has allowed the study to narrow down the focus onto socially excluded Czech Roma families with multiple disadvantages. The first three families could be considered as socially excluded in one or
in a small number of dimensions (e.g. ethnicity, education, economic situation, and/or socio-cultural traditions not conforming to the views of the majority). Families 5, 6 and 7 could be viewed as experiencing deep social exclusion and residential segregation. Deep exclusion can be explained as ‘exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances’ (Levitas et al. 2007). Family 4 could be seen as on the border between the first ‘wide’ and the second ‘deep’ social exclusions. More detailed attention will be paid to the dimensions of social exclusion and multiple disadvantages in the context of the research findings, on which the next section concentrates.

**Initial Understanding Grounded in the Field Research**

The observation and conversation notes together with the interview transcripts were coded and analysed in tandem both throughout and after the field research. The initial understanding was developed around the six most common themes observed and discussed; those being [1] lost and found Romani language and culture, [2] child’s popular and digital media experiences, [3] the role of grandparents in both media and learning experience, [4] tensions between being raised and educated by Czech institutions and by Czech Roma families, [5] issues of belonging, and [6] expectations and ambitions. Themes 3, 4 and 5 were then recognised as having shared overreaching significance to themes 1, 2 and 6, which were subsequently identified as the most prominent and relevant to the DigiLitEY’s values and objectives. The following discussion serves as an insight into these themes and their initial understanding developed mainly on the grounds of the field research and partly on the relevant literature. The analysis and discussion are initial, for there is a need for a wider and deeper engagement with literature that will be conducted and added to a journal article planned to be submitted to the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* within the next few months.

**Theme 1: Roma Language and Folklore Culture in the Czech Roma Child’s Life**

Instead of Roma identity being linked to Roma language and/or folklore and popular Roma culture in the case of the participating families, the sense of belonging to, or separation from, Roma identity was built mainly around shared minority experiences.

To begin with language, the families shared the same experience of speaking in Czech and of giving relatively little importance to the Romani language. Michal’s (C1) grandmother Adriana (GP1) suggested that ‘there are probably only a few families speaking Gipsy and not knowing Czech’ and continued saying that it ‘depends mainly on where and in which community they live’. Here Petrova (2003) explains that Roma are a ‘continuum of more or less related subgroups with complex, flexible, and multilevel identities with sometimes strangely overlapping and confusing subgroup names’ (p.114), which was equally discovered by this research. Despite that, as Veronika (P7) said and others agreed, families that would speak only Romani were, according to them, rare nowadays.

All the parents agreed that the children would ‘pick up’ Romani from elderly relatives and their peers at school, so they would learn to understand even though they would speak only little and probably with ‘bad pronunciation’, as Mirka (P1) concluded. There was a common agreement that Romani was ‘useless’, a belief which only Alena (P3) reflected as possibly negative:
‘I guess it was a mistake not to have taught them Romani. But they don’t even know what Gipsy is, they don’t understand it. If they hear something, I explain it to them, but I raise them knowing they are the same as everyone else. I prefer if they learn English, German and Russian. I prefer if they learn something for themselves, to have a profession, and Romani won’t help with that.’

Alena’s children both attended afterschool language courses, where Natalka (C3) was learning English and Russian and Honza (C4) was learning German. The importance of learning English was occasionally mentioned also by the other families, but there usually was not a clear sense of why this would actually be important. An exception was Lucinka (P2), who was taught English from an early age by her mother Jana, and her cousin Michal (P3), who was not learning yet, but his mother Mirka (P1) argued that he definitely will for she ‘wanted him to be educated’. Among the majority of participating families, English or other foreign languages were therefore perceived as a skill that needed to be actively developed, whereas Roma, even Czech, languages could be simply ‘picked up’

On one hand, as Frištenská et al. (2004, p.17) suggest, there is an ongoing trend of Romani language vanishing in the Czech Republic, that has been largely influenced by the ‘communist politics of assimilation (‘Don’t speak Gipsy with your children, they will struggle to learn at school.’)’ (author’s translation, quotation marks in original). Walsh and Krieg (2007) agree that having a ‘history of oppression and forced assimilation and their distrust of authority’ often leads Roma people to be ‘reluctant to self-identify’ (p.170). Czech language was overly dominant as even those parents who moved to the Czech Republic from Slovakia used Czech as their everyday language, despite it being common for non-Roma Slovaks living in the Czech Republic to speak Slovak. The overriding role of Czech language in contrast to the either neutral or negative attitude to Romani and/or Slovak languages does pose a question about the integration form and methods that the Czech Roma children participating in this research experience. Not only did none of the children speak Romani, but they were also not familiar with Roma folktales that were equally unknown among their parents and grandparents. The tradition of telling and retelling Romani folk stories was not carried out in the participating children’s homes, nor was it considered an important part of curricula in the participating formal and informal educational settings.

On the other hand, there was often little attention paid by the parents to active development and improvement of their own, and their children’s, command of Czech language. The exceptions were Lucinka (C2), who was actively taught Czech language both at home by her non-Roma mother and at the kindergarten, and Natalka (C3) and Honza (C4) whose mother and social worker Alena (P3) studied with, and read books to, them for both pleasure and learning (Photographs 2). Helena (P5) also read books to her children, however, she focused on the development of imagination rather than language acquisition:

‘When I read to them, they have their own fantasy, on TV they have it all made already. Like when the adult reads, the fantasy works.’
Alena was also the only one with a regional rather than ethnic accent. Helena and the rest of Roma mothers and the father interviewed and observed spoke in varying versions of Czech Romani ethnolect. Hubschmannova (1993) describes it as an unsteady form of ‘(not-) own language’ that mixes Czech and Romani words, uses Romani pronunciation and grammar structures in Czech words and sentences, as well as the other way round. She carries on explaining that the ethnolect is not established and steady enough to be accepted by the Czechs, who are greatly protective of Czech language since its central role during the cultural movement against Germanisation politics of the Habsburgs known as the Czech National Revival (from the late 18th century to 1848).

The majority of Czech Roma families involved in this research thus appeared to be trapped between two languages, without having a good command of either. The role of institutionalised informal and formal early education had a visible impact on the participating children’s Czech language acquisition, supporting the importance of pre-school education that continues to be neglected by Czech Roma families (Czech Government Office 2013), as those with regular attendance seemed to have richer vocabulary, standard pronunciation and grammar, as well as no obvious signs of speech disorder which were otherwise common among the other children. The research therefore discovered that there arguably is a need for both active Czech language acquisition and a revival of Romani language in the Czech Roma child’s home and school learning experience in order to erase or at least decrease dimensions of their social exclusion in the area of ‘social resources participation’ such as ‘economic participation, social participation in culture, education and skills, political and civic participation’ (Levitas et al. 2007, pp.117-118).

As with the Czech National Revival, Romani language and culture in the Czech Republic could be seen to be slowly moving into the era of their own cultural movement against Czechisation. When seeking contextual understanding and sensitivity within this research (Dimmock 2002), a number of Czech and Slovak authors writing in Romani language and publishing Roma folktales were found, together with
dance and music groups, educational clubs and events, among which is the internationally recognised \textit{The World Roma Festival ‘Khamoro’} held annually in Prague. Although such a cultural movement could (even if slowly) lead towards a more culturally plural society (Brooks 2002), for now this is beyond the lives of the families involved in this research for whom Roma or Gipsy identity was not connected to language and folkloric culture, but rather to shared minority experiences and lifestyle habits, which the next section discusses further, while focusing on those experiences contextually important to understanding the participating children’s learning in general, and learning with and from popular and digital media in particular.

\textit{Theme 2: Discipline and Dreams in the Czech Roma Child’s Life}

A difference was discovered between the participating families in their approach to rules and discipline together with dreams and ambitions, which created tensions between Roma and non-Roma families as well as between Roma families and communities.

When asked about parenting, the first thing Alena (P3) explained was that ‘my kids don’t live that Gipsy life, I don’t raise them that way, that if you don’t want to, you don’t have to’. At home Natalka and Honza guided me through their room and pointed out a corner where they had their toys, all together and tidied up, so whatever they would take out, they would then have to put back (Photograph 3). Veronika (P7) said she learnt to have the same demands on her children from observing the social worker Alena (P3) at the ILS day care that Veronika’s daughter Janča (C12) attends (Photographs 4). Veronika clarified that ‘it isn’t common in Roma families for the kids to clean up after themselves, mum comes and mum cleans’. The social worker Terka (SW1) further explained:

‘It’s good when mothers spend time here, they can see what their little ones like, how to work with them and then do it at home. For instance when they have no toys or books, they learn that they can just use a leaflet from Kaufland, so the kid can identify what is on the picture, what animals, what shapes, what colours.’

\textit{Photograph 3} Tided up toys in the corner of child room (taken during a guided tour)
Veronika and Terka here summarised well the importance of crossing the home-school divide (Marsh 2009) by having and working towards shared educational goals. For Alena, her goal was helping her children to have a profession and continued saying that ‘my daughter wants to be a lawyer and my son wants to be a pilot’. Alena then focused on her daughter:

‘I don’t want Natalka to be just a handmaid to her husband. So that the husband would say, you will have this many kids and I don’t care what you want. I want her to have dreams and ambitions.’

Mirka (P1) was equally sure that ‘the little one will go to a normal school’ and that she ‘will put pressure on him, because I want him to study’, to which Andrej (P2) was nodding. These families 1, 2 and 3 agreed that they want their children to be more educated and have more opportunities than they had. Alena (P3) further suggested that ‘it’s bad that many families don’t realise that their kids can live better’ and added:

‘Some [parents] even don’t know what options they have. They put the kids into schools where they are being taught in the fourth grade as if they were in kindergarten. I didn’t want this for my kids. They say, I don’t care where my kid goes to school, but I do care!’

Michal’s (C1) and Lucinka’s (C2) grandma equally stated that her grandchildren will definitely not go to a special school as her children Mirka (P1) and Andrej (P2) did. Mirka remembered that she ‘went to a normal elementary school but everyone was going to a special school’ and because she was ‘the only black among the whites, [she] stopped studying in order to go to be with the others’. She was not worried that the same would happen to Michal or Lucinka, because all children from their Roma community were now enrolled in ‘normal’ elementary schools. Despite this, Mirka sometimes felt disapproval from other family members living in different parts of the country who would laugh at them ‘for trying to be like gadjos, as if wanting to study was only for whites’. Alena (P3) faced being called ‘gadji’ even more as she [1] moved out of the Roma community, [2] was an employed woman, and [3]
cared about her children’s education and future professions. She said that all this required a lot of courage and motivation, because ‘for two-three years during this transition I did not belong anywhere, there was nowhere I was accepted except by the people at [ILS]’. Alena clarified:

‘Since we were small our parents taught us to be decent people, even when we lived in the community. Even there are many decent families, but they don’t get the chance to move out, as they might struggle to get work, have little money, and who will give you flat in the centre? Everyone is scared to take a Gipsy into their flats. [...] It took us very long to get a flat, we needed people from ILS to talk to them, and now we want to move to a bigger one and it’s still very hard. [...] I want to show Roma mothers that you can live your life differently, but they don’t listen to me anymore, they tell me I’m gadji and that I don’t understand.’

Veronika (P7) was observed experiencing a similar stalemate in which she wanted her children to live better than she did, but she felt she lacked necessary knowledge and skills, as well as her husband’s support, which was not Alena’s nor Mirka’s case. Veronika was proud of her nine years old son Riša (C13) for being an internationally successful hip hop dancer and she appreciated that ‘he regularly goes to his trainings, because the older kids already started smoking, so he doesn’t find a bad group and doesn’t make the worst of himself’. Veronika also mentioned her fourteen year old daughter, who used to practice Roma folklore dance, but said that she ‘stopped dancing when she was in puberty, so she also got much worse at school’. Veronika’s daughter was not the only girl struggling to finish elementary or high school, because as the social worker Lenka (SW2) explained, ‘there are usually no life plans for girls other than cooking and taking care of kids, so they drop out of schools and do what they were raised to do’. ILS social workers all hoped that this would not be the case of Veronika’s youngest daughter Janča (C12), who was observed to be the day care’s most regular visitor. Yet asking Janča about her dreams and ambitions was found very difficult:

Marketa: What will you do once you grow up, once you are as big as I am?
Janča: Once I am big, I will be going to school.
Marketa: And why will you be going to school?
Janča: Because I will be already big.
Marketa: And what happens when you finish school?
Janča: I will be studying.
Marketa: And once you learnt everything, what will you do?
Janča: I will be home. That’s all.
Marketa: And you will not work?
Janča: No.
Marketa: And how will you earn money?
Janča: I will be going to a store, when I’m big.

Helena’s (P5) daughters, Barča (C7) and Katka (C8) and her son David (C9) were also asked what they would like to do when they grow up. David said playing football and Katka was unable to get beyond ‘going to school’, whereas Barča mentioned a few more things before she got to talking about school.
Marketa: What will you do once you grow up, once you are as big as I am?
Barča: Eeehhh, I will for example... [Laugh and giggles]
Marketa: Well tell me, what will you do once you are thaaat big?
Barča: I’ll be cooking.
Marketa: And will you work?
Barča: Yes, I will work where the little girls are.
Marketa: Will you be a miss teacher?
Barča: I will go to your school.
Marketa: Will you go to Charles University?
Barča: Yeaaah, I will go to your school! [Laugh and giggles]

Helena believed she should not force the children to study and do things, she just wanted them to be ‘well behaved’, while Pavla (P4) said her main goal was to get them to ‘scrape through the elementary school, to have basics’ and continued, ‘but I won’t force them into anything, that no, I will be happy if they mainly scrape through’.

The research thus discovered, that although attending school and having basic education was commonly mentioned and discussed by the parents as well as the children, the level of commitment as well as the understanding of the purpose of education greatly varied. While having education leading to profession was a priority for Alena, Mirka mainly wanted her son and niece to be educated and to do better than she did, whereas the other families considered education as probably a good thing to have for some reason, but they did not treat it as a priority. For instance, Non-Roma Petra (P6) living with a Roma husband preferred her five year old daughter Marika (C11) to stay at home, learning how to clean, cook and take care of her baby brother instead of attending pre-school education. The social workers Terka and Lenka believed that the latest Amendment to the Education Act published in spring 2016 makes the pre-school year (for 5-6 year olds) obligatory mainly for the purpose of helping these Czech Roma children to prepare for the primary school entrance examination and the first year of primary education, ‘although nobody says it out loud’.

Yet the questions of ‘why is social advancement stemming from education and having a profession so difficult for Roma citizens’ and ‘why is the attitude of Roma family to social advancement of their family members so unclear, and even disapproving’ cannot be, according to Frištenská (2010, p.7, author’s translation), answered without exploring ‘romanipen’ – often referred to as the totality of what it means to be Roma – of the Czech Roma minority. Sekyt (2003) suggests that romanipen is hard to grasp, explain or even recognise by non-Roma people as it is a question of emotions and feelings rather than of a clearly defined set of characteristics and norms. Despite this, a number of studies into the Czech Roma minority have identified certain traditions and habits that seem to be unshakable and that were equally discovered by this research as relevant to the participants’ complex learning and media experience. For instance, Frištenská et al. (2004) and Frištenská (2010) discuss the tension between ‘positive’ aspects of romanipen, such as unconditional love for their children, versus ‘negative’ aspects such as despising families and individuals ‘forcing’ their children to do something, especially when it is connected to formal education, self-development and individual’s ambition. Those who deviate from romanipen might then be called gadjo or gadji and begin to feel excluded from Roma communities, while at the same time struggling to be accepted by, and integrated in, the mainstream society.
Among other possible causes, this multifaceted situation arguably restrains the potential relationships between Czech mainstream society and the Roma minority to the first three ‘ways (‘models’) in which individuals deal with living with two cultures’ out of the possible five levels of integration proposed by Lafromboise et al. (1993, in Berry 2011, p.10). ‘The first is the assimilation model, in which individuals become absorbed into the dominant cultural group, losing much of their heritage culture at the same time’ (ibid.) of which certain signs could be seen in the Czechisation of the Roma minority arguably affected by the communist regime. ‘The second is the acculturation model, which proposes that individuals will lose some of their heritage culture (as for assimilation)’ (ibid.), but at the same time they will continue being identified as a minority, which seems to be consistent with the experiences of families 1, 2 and 3. ‘A third is the alternation model, in which individuals know and understand both cultures and are capable of altering their behaviour’ (ibid.). A fifth model is fusion of two cultures until they are indistinguishable from each another. In between the alternation and fusion models is a fourth multicultural model promoting a pluralistic approach in which two cultures maintain distinct identities ‘while individuals from one culture work with those of other cultures to serve common national or economic needs’ (Lafromboise et al. 1993, p.401). This is the model connected to the previously suggested culturally plural society within which Czech mainstream society and the Czech Roma minority would actively learn about and from each other’s history, folklore culture and sociocultural norms, while simultaneously sharing common socioeconomic goals. Yet achieving such informed relationship and equally beneficial co-existence seems as an uphill struggle far in the future (Hübschmannová 1993), especially when exploring experiences of the other four families involved in the research that seemed to be simultaneously experiencing elements of assimilation as well as of social exclusion, or as Frištenská (et al. 2004, p.37, author’s translation) writes:

‘It is possible to say that as little we know about Roma people and their ways of life, that little they know us. As we have many prejudices about them, so they have about us. [...] Despite that, many Roma people would appreciate acknowledgment of their values, which have been denied to them for a long time. [...] They suffer from non-Roma prejudice about everything that they perceive as theirs and their culture. [...] This has even led many members of this ethnic group to believe that their values, culture and language actually are ‘secondary’ and worthless [...] whilst at the same time, and possibly partly as a response, they equally deny many of our core values and ways of life.’

The contextual background discussed in the first two sections should now assist understanding of the Czech Roma child’s popular and digital media experience and learning explored next.

Theme 3: Popular and Digital Media in the Czech Roma Child’s Life

There was a low awareness and understanding among the parents and the social worker of the popular and digital media’s potential role in the children’s informal and formal learning and literacy, and although the children interacted with the mainstream stories, characters and games across varying
platforms, their access was often limited and so were the repertoire of media related activities and to them connected varying skills and knowledge.

To begin with the children’s media preferences, the popular media narratives and characters the participating children engaged with and followed across varying platforms were those widely popular in the Czech Republic. The favourite ones among the girls were Monster High (2010-) doll franchise, Hello Kitty (1974-), Elsa from Frozen (2013) and Masha from Masha and the Bear (2009-) (Photographs 5). Although the boys mentioned a few animated series such as Sponge Bob (2004-), Scooby Doo (1969-), Peppa Pig (2004-) and The Simpsons (1989-), they had less specific preferences, enjoying anything to do with superheroes, sport (mainly football, boxing and hip hop dancing), cars, and/or animals (above all dinosaurs and dogs). The difference is illustrated by Photographs 6 below that were taken when spending a half-day with Michal (C1) and Lucinka (C2) at a local fair. When buying a helium balloon, Michal decided on a horse, whereas Lucinka chose Masha. Lucinka then returned and bought also Minnie Mouse, whilst Michal was interested in plastic helmets and wooden swords that together with his horse gave him a complete knight look.

*Photographs 5 Girls and their favourite media stories and characters*
Viewing, playing and gaming were at the core of the children’s media experience as they accessed these stories and characters through TV, DVDs, products (e.g. toys, notepads, t-shirts, birthday cakes), and YouTube videos and games using either tablet, smartphone or computer. The first three platforms were the most commonly owned, with a TV cabinet or entertainment centre being ‘a must in the Czech Roma households’ as the participants and social workers explained (Photographs 7). The access to digital devices was more limited and ownership usually temporary in the case of families 4, 5, 6 and 7. For instance, five-year-old Marika (C11) said she had her own phone, tablet and computer, but when asked to show them, she pointed at plastic toys. She then said that they were not working anymore, because she has not had batteries for a long time (see Photographs 8). Since Marika did not go to kindergarten or a day care, or lived close to her grandparents, she interacted mainly with her toys, TV and DVDs. Marika (C11) however said that they used to have ‘all these things’ when her mum’s ex-boyfriend lived with them, ‘but then when he left, when daddy came home from the prison, he took it all with him’. Barča (C7), Katka (C8) and David (C9) also experienced temporary ownership of digital devices that, as explained by Helena (P5), was subjected to the families’ immediate economic situation:
‘Tablets, mobile phones, they have that a lot. I don’t buy them toys anymore, they would just break them. Or put it somewhere, so it is mainly these things. But I don’t have money for it right now, so right now we don’t have it.’

Photographs 7 TV walls/cabinets in families 3 and 4

Photographs 8 Marika’s plastic iPad toy without batteries

Lenka (SW2) reflected upon similar situations in the Roma families she worked with, saying that ‘families with less stable situations sometimes have these things and sometimes don’t, they sometimes appear in households for a short while, for few days after the social benefits, and then bam, they are back in a pawnshop’. In addition to tablets and mobile/smart phones, Helena (P5) said she wishes for her children to have a computer at home, but ‘there is no money for a computer right now’, but they go to my mum’s’. Helena then added that ‘I agreed with my mum now, that she, because she has like more money, that she will help to buy a computer for the kids’. This research discovered that grandparents, often having a more stable household, played an important role in the children’s access to media and digital technologies. Libraries also represented an important access point. For instance, the library’s
The learning centre was the only way for Ríša (C13) to use a computer for chatting with his friends on messenger, playing parkour games, and downloading hip hop songs for his dancing practice. The social workers Terka and Lenka were using a projector in ILS for streaming films ‘like in the cinema as these families cannot afford to go to a cinema’ (Photographs 9). Lenka continued that they did not want a computer for the children to use in the centre, but instead were hoping to get funding for a touchpad and/or an interactive whiteboard:

‘I don’t want to pretend as if we were a school, but if my job is to be preparing the child to join an ordinary educational system, then I want the child to at least know it [the technology], to at least touch it. Once the child moves there, everything is new, new people, [...] relationships and norms, [...] so I don’t want the child to be too scared, to be surprised about everything, I’d like to take at least some pressure off the child.’

Photograph 9 Streaming on a projector at the ILS’s day care centre

However, the educational role of popular and digital media in the children’s life was not deeply nor widely recognised among the workers nor the parents. Helena (P5) had the greatest awareness about the potential values of varying media and technologies, believing that much can be learnt with and from them. She focused on David (C9), saying whenever he is on a computer and on the Internet, he ‘learns a lot of things, he finds there anything he is interested in’ and continued that ‘he is too small now, but when he is bigger, he can learn English there, because books are expensive nowadays, but there he can find and learn anything’. Similarly Pavla (P4) said that they had recently bought a computer and were waiting for the Internet to be connected, because ‘nowadays one can barely do anything, to live, without it’. Even though some of the parents had an internet connection on their smartphones and/or tablets, the purpose of these digital devices was connected to communication and entertainment, whereas for organising life and learning there was a belief that a computer was necessary. Yet still it was Helena (P5) who had the clearest sense of connection between digital media and learning among the research
participants. Although she focused only on her oldest son, David (C9), which could be interpreted as a gender stereotype as highlighted earlier, it is possible that it was because he was the only one already attending school. Moreover, David himself expressed interest in learning:

Marketa: Do you like school?
David: No.
Marketa: What don’t you like there?
David: That the boys fight there.
Marketa: With you or among each other.
David: Among each other.
Marketa: And is there anything you like at school?
David: Curriculum [‘učivo’].

She also suggested that ‘they have to deserve it’ and that they ‘cannot be there all the time’. Alena (P3) also limited her children’s media time and said they use it mainly to rest after they come from school or their afterschool clubs and before they have to do their homework (Photographs 10). In Alena’s eyes, media and digital technology’s main purpose in her children’s lives was mainly relaxation and pleasure. Mirka on the other hand (P1) saw the main value in four year old Michal’s ability to retell his favourite stories such as Little Red Riding Hood, suggesting that this was ‘great for his memory’ and that it gave her confidence in his learning abilities. She, like many of the other participating parents, did not think that there was a reason to control or regulate Michal’s media time for other reasons than ‘red eyes and headache’. During one of the observation sessions, Mirka played a Sponge Bob episode on YouTube for Michal and left him watching. Once the episode was over, the autoplay function begun to stream toy unboxing and demonstration amateur videos made by children, some as long as seven minutes (Photographs 11). Michal knew all of them and was gladly sharing his knowledge of the toys and videos with me. He said he did not want to own the toys, he just liked to watch. Mirka joined the conversation encouraging Michal to say what else he liked to watch and when he refused, she said ‘dancing butts’ and with a smile explained that he liked to watch music videos with ‘shaking woman butts’. Lastly, Pavla (P4) had a ten minute rule for using the family touchpad so each child could take a turn. She did not mind what games they played, but stated that the cooking games her daughters liked were ‘good for teaching them about ingredients’.

Photographs 10 Natalka and Honza relaxing after a school day and before doing their homework
However, it was difficult to discuss learning from, with and through popular and digital media with the parents. On one hand, there might have been little awareness about the relationship between folklore, popular and digital media and both learning and complex development. On the other hand, the relatively low parental control and regulation of the children’s media engagement might have been connected to romanipen values. When trying to enliven the discussion, I encouraged the parents to share their own media experience together with representations of Roma people in the Czech media. This however did not help, with the former being limited to mainly social media and a Czech telenovela-like series *Ordinace v Růžové zahradě* (2005-), and with the latter being imaginable only for Alena (P3) who alone was able to discuss the concept, saying that it would ‘maybe help, but mainly for improving the way non-Roma people see us’ rather than for setting an example. The concept of media representation of Roma people and culture on media could also be interpreted as irrelevant to the participants for the same two reasons.

The degree of their role in the individual families and their members’ media experience probably greatly varies and indeed there is more contextual information and more research needed in order to achieve a complex understanding of the Czech Roma children’s media and literacy learning experience. Yet what could be stated based on this limited research is that there were signs of digital literacy neglect and a connected tendency towards a digital divide between Czech mainstream society and the participating Czech Roma children that were under nine years of age and facing multiple disadvantages. Here then the low [1] awareness of, [2] attention to, and [3] importantly also motivation for, media and digital literacies might be yet another disadvantage of the Czech Roma children experiencing wide or deep social exclusion.

The European Union’s *Lifelong Learning Programme*, which stands behind a digital competence framework, has recognised this issue and among other publications released *A practical guide. The Roma people and the use of ICT as a socio-economic and cultural inclusion tool* (Cicciarelli 2015). The guide argues that key competences of digital literacy (that are currently under review with the revised version planned to be published in May 2016) ‘are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment’ (Cicciarelli 2015, p.16) and specifies (*ibid.*, pp.17, 25):
‘This reference framework applies above all to disadvantaged groups […] that include Roma, especially women, […] who require support in order to fulfil their educational potential. […] In order to ensure a successful dissemination of digital literacy competence among the Roma community, the issue has to be approached from different angles, from the most obvious, the logistics angle, to the more complex, which require the activation of social and productive networks.’

Among the six follow-up recommendations is that ‘there should be mediation at the relational and cultural level, and not only at the information and communicative level’ and that ‘all pro-Roma initiatives should be designed together with the Roma communities, not only for obvious reasons of democracy and recognition of active citizenship rights, but also because, as already mentioned, it is necessary to bear in mind the cultural factors and the importance of the extended family, the clan and the community in Roma life’ (ibid., pp.25-26). The research funded and supported by the COST Action IS1410: DigiLitEY introduced in this report provides qualitative data generated through the active participation of seven Czech Roma families – including children, parents and grandparents – and supports and further illustrates the need for such a complex approach breaking the vicious circle of ignorance among both non-Roma and Roma societies, communities, families and individuals. Among other emerging themes and topics relevant to the DigiLitEY’s aims and values, the potentially most intriguing original knowledge grounded in this limited research could be shaped in the journal article around the (dis)connection between media and digital literacy and the child’s personal, social and professional dreams, ambitions, and life motivations.

**Future Plans**

The research has offered a number of emerging themes discussed in this report in relevance to DigiLitEY’s purpose and initiatives. The next step is to develop a more complex discussion about the Czech Roma children’s multimodal literacy learning by grounding this primary research in a wider and deeper literature review for the purpose of greater understanding shared through an academic publication and conference talk(s), as well as through a publicly more accessible report and/or workshop targeted at the Open Society Prague, the involved formal and informal educational settings and the families participating in this research. I am currently in touch with the Institute of Romanic Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy (CU), looking for a doctoral, post-doc or early career researcher willing to assist with the dissimilation activities – once again honouring DigiLitEY’s emphasis on interdisciplinary cooperation. Further in the future, there is a potential of using this inquiry as a pilot study for a larger European research and innovation project suitable for [2] Horizon 2020 or Erasmus + funding and applied for by a consortium that would include Bournemouth University, Charles University and DigiLitEY’s member institutions, and for [2] Economic Social Research Council’s Future Research Leaders grant for which I hope to apply with the Knowledge Lab at the Institute of Education in London.
Conclusion

This has been a complex and influential experience that has allowed me to gain new knowledge and skills in research, education and practice. I am deeply grateful to DigiLitEY’s team for supporting these networking and research initiatives, as well as to Julian McDougall (CEMP, Bournemouth University) and Alice Němcová-Tejkalová (IKSJ, Charles University) for making this happen. Another big thanks go to the Open Society Fund Prague, Jekhetane o.p.s and the Special School Rožnov pod Radhoštěm for their expertise and professional guidance. Last but not least, I would like to express heartfelt gratitude to the research participants for sharing their experience and everyday life with me and for helping me to recognise my own ignorance.

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