

*There is no doubt that in the Czech Republic there is a persistent and dramatic achievement gap in education outcomes of Roma children and non-Roma children. This gap has its roots deeply embedded in the characteristics of Czech educational system which is only now slowly transforming from schooling of socialist era to the modern inclusive education. In this paper we will show what changes has the transition of Czech society brought to the Roma in general and specifically in terms of education. We will argue that unless particular major changes will be made, the Roma children in Czech schools will be constantly failing and their overall position in Czech society will be only worsening. The most important change is the uncompromising attitude against segregation of Roma children that is far more serious than it is at present admitted by the responsible authorities, because it is not connected only with placing of Roma children in special schools intended for children with light mental disabilities, but mainly to their segregation in the 'Roma schools'.*

Key words: Roma achievement gap, 'Roma schools', segregation, inclusive education

## **Introduction**

Roma minority is, according to the qualified estimates, the largest minority in the Czech Republic, however, minority rights of Roma people are difficult to claim, because officially only a very small part of this group declared themselves to be Roma. On this basis of informality, Roma people have been constantly discriminated in many spheres of their lives – one of them has been the education of Roma children, which is widely criticised by non-governmental organisations or European official authorities. Main reason for this lays in the importance of education for their prospective higher education opportunities and employability. In this paper we will examine how the Czech educational system just cannot cope with the otherness of Roma children and is punishing them for that by placing them into the lowest-achieving schools. At the same time we will show that this inability to cope with otherness has its roots in the socialist organisation of the education.

This study aims to explore the ways Roma children have been educated in the Czech Republic and to analyse the underlying causes of constant underachievement of Roma children despite the various efforts on the side of official authorities, law adjustments and pedagogical workers to support these children and intervene positively in their educational outcomes.

**What did the transition of Czech society brought to the Roma in general?**

The Roma that currently live in the Czech Republic came to its territory shortly after Second World War from the poor village areas of Slovakia to fill in free vacancies in the industrial area. Majority of the original Roma living in the Czech Republic have been killed in Holocaust. Their position in the Czech Republic, however, was not ideal even before this tragic event.

Shortly after arrival of Roma to Europe they started to be resented by the natives, partly on the basis of violation of Christian morals and partly because of being considered to be Tatar and Turkish spies (Fraser 1995). The worst time for the Roma in the Czech territory probably came with the reign of Leopold I. when they were expelled from the country and in addition to this, the law was adopted which permitted the homicide of the Roma men. Their children were then given to 'good Christian families' for the proper upbringing (Nečas 1999). The 18<sup>th</sup> century is then connected with forced assimilation during the reign of the Empress Maria Theresa; the only light moment about this is that the Roma were also perceived as any other ordinary peasants and they stopped to be persecuted. As peasants, however, they had to settle down and stop travelling for the living.

This forced settling down was made even more restrictive shortly before the Second World War, when the registry of all the Roma living in the Czech Republic was written. As we have already mentioned, almost all the Czech Roma were interned in the concentration camps and killed. After the Second World War, Slovak Roma moved in abandoned houses in Czech borderland and city centres. Partly this moving was motivated by the effort for better living conditions; partly it was the organized state policy of Roma dispersion (Ringold 2000). Situation of the Roma minority in the socialist era was quite difficult, because in the time of full employment all those who were not working for any reason were considered to be the parasites and often imprisoned. If this was relating to both parents in the family, their children

were institutionalised in the educational facility, because the environment of the family was not perceived as healthy for the growing up of children.

After the revolution of 1989, the Roma were for the first time acknowledged as the national minority. However, only the fragment of the Roma population has declared themselves as Roma and therefore they could not claim for any minority rights, e. g. education in their mother tongue. Nowadays at least some associations and non-government organisations are aspiring to raise the Roma culture and overall awareness of their customs and habits.

Another major change occurred in their employability. During the socialist era, many of the Roma were employed in industrial jobs in state factories and companies. After the revolution, the Roma were the first to be dismissed from their work not only because of diminishing number of manual jobs, but also because of hidden racism that was present also during the socialist era, but could not be shown. At present, the second generation of Roma children is growing up that haven't seen any of the close relatives going to work regularly.

According to Frištenská (1999), after the revolution there also emerged interethnic conflict that was caused by the fact, that Roma minority started to act like minority and had some minority claims, which made them visible in the public sphere and also by the fact that some extreme attitudes of non-Roma started to be more visible – the Roma were by them perceived through the lens of stereotypes and prejudices like criminals, parasites and welfare-dependent people. Nowadays, there is the effort of Czech government to regulate extreme attitudes and ethnic discrimination, but this effort is strongly motivated by the pressure of the European institutions.

Interest of the European institutions in the situation of the Roma is another important aspect of transition. After the opening of borders some Roma emigrated to Canada and to other Western countries, where they were asking for asylum on the basis of racial

discrimination they faced in the Czech Republic. The situation concerning discrimination was then subject of many researches and observations and in 2009 the research of FRA (Fundamental Rights Agency) found out that the Czech Roma were the most discriminated minority in Europe.

All these aspects have been shaping the mutual relations of the Roma and non-Roma living together in the Czech territory. Since their first arrival to Europe the Roma here were systematically stigmatised, isolated and excluded. Their children were placed in special schools where they learned significantly less than they would have learned in ordinary school, they did not come into contact with children from the majority, and their life opportunities were dramatically abridged. It is then quite understandable that they cannot see the possibility to succeed in the Czech society in an ordinary way and are trying to find other ways of living.

### **Education of the Roma in the socialist era and before**

Upbringing of the Roma children originally took place solely in the community and was happening somehow unintentionally while doing all the everyday activities (Smith 1997). Roma children were taught only what they needed to know in their closest environment, that means community. However, nowadays in the Czech Republic traditional Roma communities have been loosened and therefore the Roma today are not as much a subject of the strong social control that used to be present all the time in villages, where they used to live before moving to Czech towns (Sekyt 2004).

During the reign of Maria Therese and her son Joseph, II., Roma children were subjected to compulsory school attendance and also compulsory church attendance. Even though this was the time of strong assimilation the Roma were living with their neighbours in peace and finally were not persecuted. The Czech Roma gradually started to get used to the settled way of life, but this promising process of integration was violently interrupted by the Second World War.

After the War, the era of strong assimilation occurred again, despite the fact that this assimilation was unconstitutional, because it was violating the condition of equality of all the citizens, it was happening with unbelievable strength (Haišman 1999). The era of socialism was characteristic with the effort to educate the Roma and to blur the ethnic differences in Czechoslovakia. There was cruel campaign against travelling and also forced school attendance in which parents saw no meaning for their children. In spite of the fact, that the overall literacy of the Roma population rose, they were still educated in special schools designed for children with mental and physical disabilities. Balabánová (1999) argued that the main reason therefore lays in the fact that education in this time and during the socialist era was characteristic with the idea of the standard school, which is predominantly inhabited with 'average pupils' and Roma children have never fitted this model. Basic schools have counted with children that had mastered dominant language before entering the school, children that had developed their willing abilities and that disposed with supportive home environment. All the children that could not fit this model have been to some extent disadvantaged, many were even shifted to schools with lower requirements on knowledge and good manners.

Public social services, such as schools or social workers, then meant for the Roma only the way how the majority tries to control them. As Ringold stresses it: 'the forced and often repressive nature of the integration campaigns fomented mistrust and tensions between Roma and public social services (2000: 6).' In addition to this, because of the fact that state institutions provided the Roma with jobs, ensured their living and also necessary social care, the Roma fell in the trap of dependency.

### **Major changes in educating of Roma children in the last twenty years**

During socialist era about 70 % of all Roma children were according to the qualified estimates attending the special schools. This was mainly due to their supposed light mental disability, which was in fact the combination of language barrier Roma children face when they first

attend the Czech school and of the lack of sensual incentives which is connected with the poor environment Roma children are usually coming from. Nowadays, the situation is slightly better and according to GAC (2009) about 28 % of Roma children are still educated in these special education facilities.

However, one major change has occurred with the new school law in 2005. Special schools were abolished and replaced with 'practical schools', the amount of what children learn there is about the same as in the former special schools. Special schools, however, were not acknowledged as finished primary education; therefore the possibilities of subsequent education for their school leavers were very limited. Practical schools are now by law understood as equivalent and fully acknowledged type of the primary education – this theoretically means that any school leaver can enter any secondary school, not only the vocational training like from the special schools. This, however, really works only on theoretical level and it applies in a similar way to 'Roma schools' as well, because children there are often repeating grades and leaving schools even before completing the school or have at best ambitions for the vocational training, because their knowledge in the ninth grade equals to the knowledge of the pupils in the sixth or seventh grade of the ordinary primary school or even lower.

The Czech educational system after 2005 gained new important element called *Framework educational programs* for all the types of education. These programs are at present the only given documents teachers and schools in general have to accept, when preparing their lectures and lessons. In accordance with the framework program, schools and teachers are creating their own school educational programs, while following the general framework given. Probably the most useful feature of the framework educational program is its flexibility, which really allows the teacher to create the lecture in a way that will meet the

needs of all the children in the classroom. In practice, however, this option is not used much, because it means much more work for the teacher.

In addition to this, there is a document called *National Action Plan for the Inclusive Education* (MŠMT 2011) elaborated on the national level that clearly states what needs to be done in order to achieve inclusion in the education. However, all documents are somehow declaratory and it is difficult to get their ideas into practice. Generous projects from the European institutions are helping in this effort a bit, but still the lack of finances is perceived by the teachers and directors as the main problem and obstacle in achieving inclusion.

### **The educational achievement gap and its main causes**

One of the most detailed researches on the educational trajectories of the Roma children (GAC 2009) shows clear contours of their achievement gap. According to this research, about half of all the Roma children are attending ordinary schools; about 28 % are attending ‘practical schools’ and about 25 % are attending the ‘Roma schools’ (we will get to them later). Even those who are the in mainstream education are relatively unsuccessful in comparison to their Czech school-mates: according to the research of GAC (2009: 22), only half of Roma children who started their education in the mainstream school will finish their compulsory school attendance with the same classmates they started it. The rest will either be transferred to practical schools, or will repeat one or more school years<sup>1</sup>. This research, however, wasn’t taking into account children that were transferred to other ordinary schools, which in this context could have been ‘Roma schools’, therefore the final number of Roma children leaving their original class for ‘worse’ may be even higher. Moreover, the probability that Roma child will start his/her educational path in special school (and then probably never comes to contact with the mainstream education and children from the majority) is six times higher than is this probability for a non-Roma child (GAC 2009: 32).

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<sup>1</sup> The same applies only for one of ten non-Roma children.

One aspect of the achievement gap lies directly in the schools – practical schools and ‘Roma schools’ are to some extent very similar to each other in terms of what and how children can be taught. However, it is important to stress that the ‘Roma schools’ are designed for perfectly able children, who are just accidentally coming from socially disadvantaged environment and are predominantly of Roma ethnic origin. The teachers in the Roma schools are coping with these two characteristics in very unusual ways: they for instance have very basic expectations from their pupils. The reason for this may be that teachers understand specifics of Roma children represented by socially-disadvantaged origin, small interest in education and gaining new knowledge and language barrier, as unchangeable and everlasting. Therefore their idea of success in educating these children lies in e. g. children respecting at least basic rules such as changing shoes for slippers, when they come to school; when teachers despite all the bad experiences with children still like to go to work; when ‘weak pupils’ know how to read, write and count at least a little, while the better students know something more, or even try to follow the primary education with some vocational training. On the one side, this definition of success is probably necessary for these teachers in order to feel successful, on the other side, it forms their expectations and directly influences the way they are teaching the children.

One of the most important causes of the Roma achievement gap lies probably in the persistent segregation of the underachieving Roma children. However, about half of the Roma children are educated in the mainstream schools and still cannot succeed. The reason is that there are other causes contributing to the low achievement of Roma children in the Czech schools as well.

Firstly, poverty and social exclusion determine what children know when they first come to school in a significant way. Research undertaken by Ringold (2000) clearly shows that poverty of the Roma population is different from the poverty in the majority: ‘Roma



poverty' is multidimensional, has deep historical roots and it is constantly being enhanced by the vicious cycle of isolation and stigmatisation. In accordance to this finding, concept of poverty is nowadays almost replaced with the concept of social exclusion which is better describing not only vertical, but also horizontal inequalities in societies. Despite of these conceptual differences, living conditions in both situations are very similar. In the Czech Republic, about half of the Roma population lives in socially excluded areas, which usually means that they are living at the edge of poverty – few generations of one family in one- or two-rooms flat, sometimes without direct access to hot water or toilet – with similarly disadvantaged people living in close neighbourhood. It is clear that under these conditions, especially when parents have more than three children and older children have to take care of the smaller ones, it is not easy to fulfil the obligations of school attendance and home preparation. Children from poor families can be also more often sick and therefore unable to attend the school regularly. At the same time they usually have worse access to institutions that could help them to eliminate their social disadvantage and therefore they are often starting their school life in special education schools instead of mainstream schools. Biro, Smederevac and Tovilović (2009) revealed that poverty also significantly influences the results of these children in intelligence tests (not only the educational outcomes), which are significantly lower than the outcomes of the middle-class children. The main problem, however, lies not only in insufficient cognitive stimuli, but also in the inability of parents to help their children. On the one hand, they don't know how to help, because they usually have at best finished basic or special schools. On the other hand, in the environment of poverty education never played a crucial role in the story of life success.

Secondly, the education of the Roma children can be also complicated by the characteristics, which are considered to be part of the Roma cultural heritage. The nature of Roma family is for instance in clear conflict with the ability to achieve individual success,

therefore the individual effort put into higher education is perceived as pointless and fruitless (Jakoubek 2009). Individual success is viewed as endangering for family solidarity and because of that family is providing almost any support to those trying to get out of the exclusion. In addition to this, every income that one gains is shared among the broad family and the efforts put into education or work are then not adequate to the gains one gets in the end (Steiner 2004).

Thirdly, language barrier stands as almost impassable obstacle on the way to better educational achievement. According to observations, Roma mothers do not talk directly to their children when they are very small as do non-Roma mothers. Říčan (1998) explains this with firmer bonding of mother and child and with their ability to understand each other without verbal communication. In addition to this, almost any Roma in the Czech Republic are not teaching their children Romani language, because they don't want them to feel excluded. Then they are trying to teach them the Czech language, but the Czech they know is the language of the working class mixed with Roma phonetics, pronunciation and grammatical models (Hübschmannová, 1998). The result of this is that Roma child first coming to school (meaning often first close encounter with the non-Roma environment) is not able to speak neither Czech, nor Romani, because nobody has talked to them since they were babies. The problem of Roma children is not bilingualism or not knowing the dominant language, but the fact that they do not know any language they can be taught in<sup>2</sup>. In the past, life in their community was accompanied by telling stories and tales, through which children could easily enrich their vocabulary at least in their mother tongue, however, this opportunity has slowly disappeared.

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<sup>2</sup> Lazarová and Pol (2002: 11) estimated that Roma child coming to school possess the vocabulary of 400-800 Czech words, while at the same time Czech child possess the vocabulary of 2000-3500 words. If we considered the fact that Roma parents are not talking to the children much, we cannot expect their Romani vocabulary to be any richer.

All above-mentioned factors lead to poor educational outcomes and to the fact that many of the Roma children either start or at one point of their educational path continue in special schools or 'Roma schools'. Both types are unable to provide equal education to the mainstream schools or develop children's individual potential in a way that would make them able to succeed in the labour market competition (Hůle 2007). Interesting is that at both types of schools teachers and directors are convinced that this type of education is the best what can be offered to the Roma children.

### **Segregation as the main problem of the Roma education**

As we have shown there are two types of schools which are providing inadequate education to the Roma children. First we will have a look at the practical schools and then at the Roma schools, which share some really unexpected similarities, especially when we take into account, who they are designed for.

On the one hand, these special schools were meant to help the children to experience at least to some extent the feeling of success, because the curriculum there was abridged and with small number of children in one class it was easier for a teacher to pay individual attention to each child. At the same time, this kind of schools was also preferred by the parents of Roma children, because in these schools they were only little taken as responsible for their child's education and home preparation, or they themselves could also have their experience with this school (Klíma 1997). However, both of these statements can be held true also for the majority of 'Roma schools'.

The basis of the program in practical schools is not in knowledge, theory or curriculum. This program is oriented on activity in the classes and practical use of acquired knowledge in everyday life. At the same time, successful school leaver should have basic general knowledge, he should be able to express himself clearly in a written as well as in a spoken way and he should be enough manually skilled (Krupa 1997). At this place we need to stress

that special or practical schools are designed as schools for children with light mental disabilities, therefore the expectations from them are so basic.

Majority of the contemporary 'Roma schools' started like any other ordinary basic school, the only problem was that they were located in the area with the majority of Roma inhabitants and when the share of Roma children reached about 40 % of the pupils' population, school experienced 'white flight' as we know it from the American experience in connection to African-American neighbourhoods (Kahlenberg, 2001; Schwab, 1992). It means that only those who can afford to commute with their children to a further place from home or can afford to move out from the neighbourhood completely can leave unsatisfactory school. The rest just has to put up with the changes and try to survive till the child's compulsory education ends. On the one hand, teachers in 'Roma schools' are complaining about majority leaving, which is according to them deteriorating the overall quality of the education. On the other hand, they alone claim that they would never put their own child to this school and even when they have the Roma assistants at school they have put their children to other basic school. This means that teachers are aware of the poor quality of education they are offering to Roma children, but still feel that it is not in their power to change it.

'Roma schools' are not only similar to practical schools, they are also similar to so called 'high-poverty schools' (Donovan, Cross 2002; Kahlenberg 2001) This type of school is 'marked by students that have less motivation and are often subjects of negative peer influences; parents who are generally less active, exert less clout in school affairs, and garner fewer financial resources for the school; and teachers who tend to be less qualified, to have lower expectations, and to teach watered-down curriculum' (Kahlenberg 2001: 47). All these can be held true also for the 'Roma schools' in the Czech Republic. The socioeconomic

makeup of schools directly influences the dynamics of the educational process and the goals that teachers set for themselves and for the pupils.

However, there is one major difference between ‘high-poverty schools’ and ‘Roma schools’: the problem with lack of finances is not so visible, because ‘Roma schools’ are usually very well materially and personally equipped – they are using the maximum of possible projects from Ministry of Education, European Social Fund or municipalities (GAC, 2009). Many of these projects are labelled as if they were supporting inclusion and inclusive schools; unfortunately, in reality there is really only little of inclusion in this type of schools. Usually the money received is used not for supporting inclusion, but for employing more teachers, for providing better psychological counselling and reducing the number of children in the classroom. This all may be improving the performance of Roma children at schools, but still has nothing to do with inclusion (at least until the expectations and curriculum will not equalize with those in the mainstream schools).

The study of Roma child’s educational trajectory (GAC, 2009) states that Roma children in ‘Roma schools’ tend to repeat the grade less often than Roma children in the mainstream schools and it explains this with higher motivation of the teachers to work with this kind of children: they want to devote their time and effort to these children, cooperate with non-governmental organisations and support the activities which are eliminating their handicaps. Some teachers in ‘Roma schools’ felt that the education of Roma children is some kind of a mission in their lives, but at the same time they argued that the grades the children are getting in their school are better than they would get for the same educational achievement in the mainstream school (because teachers are satisfied, when children know less than is usually expected from children of the same age). They are not looking for the ways of eliminating social handicap, but instead they are downsizing taught curriculum and own expectations

according to supposed children's abilities. This is probably the cause, why children are repeating the grades less often in 'Roma schools' than in the mainstream schools.

Segregation in connection with social exclusion adds to the problem of education another dimension: Roma people after being excluded to abandoned neighbourhoods lose almost all the contacts with the Czech majority. This fact enhances stereotypes and prejudices at both sides. The Roma understand their situation as unchangeable and abandon any values which are dominant in the mainstream society. Říčan (1998) states that therefore the Roma developed identity of victims and misunderstood people, identity of being hurt and identity of majority confrontation. If the attitude of the Roma is so hostile, then it is transferred to their children and must be reflected in the educational process.

### **How to achieve inclusive education?**

The main problem in educating Roma children probably lies in the wider setting of the educational system. As Balabánová (1999) states the mainstream Czech schools are expecting 'average children' and everyone who is deviating to any side of this average is understood as disadvantaged. This does not necessarily mean that the talented children will face some serious difficulties in the mainstream school, even though it can happen that they will be bored and punished for any disturbances they cause; for sure it means that their potential will not be fully developed, unless they meet a teacher, who is willing to prepare special tasks for them. The truth is that every child with special needs needs some kind of a special care, which can be provided for example by the assistant, or a second teacher in a classroom, if one teacher is not capable of preparing two or three types of lectures.

Teachers in 'Roma schools' are convinced that they are providing the Roma children with the accepting environment that is allowing them to experience the feeling of success and being majority for a change. In addition to this, events supporting and strengthening the Roma culture, such as dance and singing performances are more frequently organised in 'Roma

schools' than in the mainstream schools. Teachers are often to some extent providing the parents with basic social guidance as well. Despite this, the self-perception of the Roma children, feeling of their own importance and meaningfulness of gained knowledge would have been strengthened, if they had a chance to get to know something more about their origin or even learn the Romani language. According to Mann (1992), Roma children are at school taught about alien history, alien writers and alien cultural norms and values and therefore they cannot be interested in what they are learning.

We have shown where the most serious difficulties in educating Roma children come from. It is for certain, that the part of the educational failure lies in the small importance of education for Roma in general, however, the bigger part of this issue is dependent on the Czech educational system and the opportunities that Czech society offers to Roma as a whole.

A lot can be improved with uncompromising approach to segregation of any kind, especially the segregation in 'Roma schools', which is in general considered as harmless. As we tried to stress, the 'Roma schools' are not offering any better opportunities in next professional carrier than the special or practical schools. It would definitely be helpful if Roma children had the opportunity to be educated in their own language or at least had a real chance to improve their Czech to the level so that they can be educated in it. Firstly, to be able to exercise any changes, we have to stop constructing the educational failure of Roma children and try to understand the way they feel in our schools, which for them are usually completely strange and new environment. Secondly, there should be some respect for their cultural specifics not only in what they are taught, but especially in how they are taught. Thirdly, if we are not able to change the Roma and practical schools into inclusive schools we should at least stop to expect less from these children, because the majority of them is able to learn as much as the non-Roma children, maybe they need only little more time or different teaching methods. Finally, individual approach to each child and his family as a whole is

probably key to success, because then we can concentrate on any specifics that are needed to be resolved and educate the child in a responsible and a meaningful manner.

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