RESPONDENT: School principal

LOCATION: S.

GENDER: Female

DATE: November 2, 2009

T: First, I would like to ask you about your role here, or if you are a class teacher somewhere?

R: I am the principal of the two entities that merged on September 1st: the elementary school and the kindergarten. The kindergarten is a little further away. I am not a class teacher, but I teach a little bit in each class.

T: Hmm. What does that mean? Are you teaching specific subjects?

R: For example, in the second and third grades, I teach Czech and mathematics, and in the first, second, and third grades, I teach ethics. In the fourth and fifth grades, I also teach ethics.

T: Do you have any specialization in special education, for example?

R: I have completed the first level, and I studied special education at a higher vocational school.

T: Did you teach elsewhere before?

R: I taught for a year, while I was still completing my higher education. I taught at F., which is a local school. From one extreme to another. F. has six hundred students, forty or fifty teachers, and then I came here.

T: To a smaller school. Do you plan any changes, or are you satisfied here for now?

R: I am definitely very satisfied. I can't even say satisfied. My dreams have been exceeded. I never even dreamed that I would enjoy this job so much. I was a very naughty child, and I had a really tough time during my puberty, running away from home, and so on. It was really bad for me. I started as a cleaner, cleaning at the music school because there was a school janitor's apartment there. Then I completed my education, and now I'm here, and it's great. But of course, I won't stay here. Not that I don't want to stay here, but I feel like I have the potential to change the world. So I have to aim higher. I definitely have political ambitions. I love politics. I would love to at least get a taste of it. Maybe I'll be lucky and get into some political position and find out that it's not effective at all. The truth is that what keeps me in this job is that I see that I can work with these children. That the situations and their life stories change in your hands as you go along. Within certain limits. So if I were in a job where it would be pointless, I probably wouldn't stay there, but I have some ideals.

T: Now, I'll ask about your experiences with educating Romani children specifically. Do you think there is a difference in how you teach Romani children compared to children from the majority?

R: I don't differentiate between Romani and white children. Can I use "white" and "Romani" for the sake of simplicity in this conversation? It may sound weird, but it's simple and quick. I don't differentiate between Romani and white children in terms of differences in education, and these differences do exist. But I differentiate between children from stimulating environments and children from non-stimulating environments. That's the difference. Because here we have children with learning disabilities who come from stimulating environments, and it's easier to work with them. Then there are children from non-stimulating environments with learning disabilities, and they need to be approached differently. And there are children from non-stimulating environments who seem to have normal intelligence, and I know that if we don't work with them differently, it won't work. I understand the situation, and sometimes parents choose special schools themselves because with regular curriculum, methods, and work forms, children from non-stimulating environments are completely left on the sidelines; they are on a completely different starting line. It just doesn't work. In my opinion, a reasonable person who recognizes these differences cannot think that all children can be taught the same way.

T: So it comes down to practical solutions. As you say, it requires different approaches. Do you have practical methods for addressing this? Are there children from stimulating and non-stimulating environments, and how do you coordinate them all together?

R: One basic aspect is that part of the education cannot be transferred home. It simply doesn't work that way. We need to have such interesting and stimulating supplementary education that the children want to do it here. They shouldn't come up from the after-school club feeling miserable, thinking, "Oh, we have to do more homework here." No, we need to come up with it in such an interesting way that the children want to come and know why they are doing it. That's the foundation, and I believe it can be done everywhere. We also provide supplementary education after our regular work. Another aspect is changing the assessment. Once we assess traditionally with grades and compare children to each other, their motivation drops to zero because their results will be poor. When we change assessment to be individual, when children learn to assess themselves, and we teach them to compare themselves to their own results, they see progress, they enjoy it, and they go to school willingly. They see that something is happening. If I start giving them Cs and Ds because their performance is at that level, the child has no motivation to improve. The child can't even improve because the truth is that compared to the rest of the class, they will likely have Cs and Ds.

T: But there is no progress. So you don't grade them at all?

R: I will finish that thought. Changing assessment is the second pillar. The third is thinking about the curriculum content for some children. This is a highly controversial topic because when they handed us the certificate, I said something similar somewhere, and I was criticized that it's not a good school when they don't teach what they should. But for some children, synonyms and antonyms are abstract terms, and for some children, imagining minorities and majorities... Those children will know what it is in practice. They will understand the concepts, even if they name them differently. They can even forget that those words are synonymous, but the important thing is that they have a larger vocabulary, they can express themselves. We should focus on other things. If I give them a test or an assignment asking them to write two synonyms for "beautiful," I'm a hundred percent sure that they won't write anything. So, thinking about the curriculum content is also essential. In my opinion, it's overstated, but we run into the problem of the entire education plan. The curriculum is quite detailed in the framework education plan, but the textbooks that schools commonly use are still based on the old standards, so the same topics like adjective endings and decimal numbers that should be taught in the upper grades are still taught in the lower grades. We can't afford not to teach them because these children move on to the next school level. Fourthly, working with parents. I don't think these children would stay here for so long if they didn't trust the school and us as teachers. So, preparing events for parents, visiting them at home occasionally, building that trust. These are the four most important pillars in thinking about why we should teach children differently, how to teach them differently, and whether it makes sense.

T: Are there subjects where you would say Romani children or children from non-stimulating environments have worse results, and conversely, are there things they excel in more than others? 00:14:27-2

R: Here I can talk about Romani children calmly because I will be discussing ethical education. They absolutely excel in ethical education. It's very visible how these children think in emotions, understand them, can portray them, and relate them to situations. I'm not saying they can resolve conflicts, but they try. They want to understand social interactions, they're interested in others. When we play a game of gifts, eighty percent of Romani children forget about themselves before they manage to give gifts to their entire family and all their aunts up to the third degree. That's where you can see the differences. We also have talented children here who can mutually enrich each other when you put them in pairs or work in groups or portray dramatic situations together. Because the white, smart child, if I may say so, sits carved into their desk, afraid to make a mistake, always wants to be the best, doesn't want to share their success with others. These are huge differences. Then we can talk about visual arts education, practical activities, and music education, which are subjects that are a pity to be ranked lower in some schools because these are subjects in which Romani children excel. They're not shy, they're spontaneous, temperamental, not afraid to express themselves in colors, to dance to a song. I can't say all of them, but eighty percent of these children. We have a third of Romani children here, and in these subjects, there is indeed a difference. On the other hand, reading comprehension. A serious problem. It seems to you that you've managed to learn to read at least a little more fluently, and after the holidays, it's like starting from scratch. While the white child spent two months reading on the internet, even if they don't read books, they looked at some magazine, picked up a comic somewhere, read a menu in a restaurant. These children do not encounter words.

00:17:31-5

T: So, in general, languages might be a problem.

00:17:36-0

R: Maybe in terms of listening and communication because we strictly divide English, by that I mean in terms of time, not educationally, into conversational and grammatical. So, in the conversational part, these children don't have a problem. They usually have good hearing and are open and temperamental, so it's not difficult for them to listen, repeat, try to have a conversation in that language. But as soon as it gets to the level of grammar or understanding something, like a text, that's the stumbling block. These children usually haven't been to kindergarten, so they start in the first grade. If I compare this to the majority child in terms of the Czech language, that means vocabulary, expression abilities, and the ability to understand text, I would estimate that they are three years behind. How do you catch up? They can repeat a year, which we usually recommend to parents. Not because these children can't handle it completely, but because we see that the gap, the difference, is significant. To at least level it out for a year, and it's still difficult to catch up. And I'm not even talking about the children who only speak Romani at home.

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T: Is there something like a retention policy here?

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R: Well, of course. At each grade, a student can only repeat once. We don't let students repeat grades just because they have a few failing grades. We usually give students verbal evaluations on their report cards, especially when their educational results are not very bright. We often recommend repeating to parents. Not because these children can't handle it, but because we see that there is a big gap. So, repeating a year is mostly to even it out for them, and it's still difficult to catch up. And I'm not talking about the children who only speak Romani at home.

00:23:39-4

T: Can it be said that the problems you encounter have a beneficial character, or are there perhaps discipline problems or attendance problems?

00:23:50-5

R: No, no, no, no. I'll split it a bit. Attendance problems are among the Roma, who I refer to as Olas (although I haven't verified if they really are). So, I divide them into, perhaps inaccurately, those of Slovak origin and the Olas. Because with those of Slovak origin, who are from the socially weaker, but not the weakest, classes, attendance problems are not an issue at all. Those children are hardly ever sick, while with the Olas Roma, on the contrary, attendance problems are significant. I would say that from my discussions with other principals, it's still possible here. We're still able to create an environment for them that doesn't discourage them, and their parents communicate with us. Some of them are willing to download homework from the website and work on it at home. As for discipline, we don't have any problems with Olas Roma either. These are children who need a bit of protection among their peers because their life experiences are miserable. These are children who have never been to the woods, never ridden a bus. These are the children who are driven everywhere by car, they are overly cared for to avoid mosquito bites, to prevent something from happening to them, or to avoid being approached by a stranger, especially girls. It seems to me that these children are raised as babies until the age of fifteen and then get married at sixteen. So, there wasn't much room to build something with the school. I wouldn't call it problems; I feel sorry for these children because there is certainly a lot of intellectual potential to tap into if Romani is not spoken at home. It's easier to work with them because there are at least some stimuli in that environment. Whereas with those of Slovak origin, attendance is excellent, but sometimes upbringing is a bit lacking. When there are six or eight children in a family, especially boys, they are taken care of in such a way that they are at home with their mothers until...

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T: Then they hit the street.

00:27:14-9

R: Girls are fine. I don't want to generalize, but I could find some intersections in these sets. But to call any of this a problem that we would have difficulty dealing with, no.

00:27:49-2

T: Do you have any specific programs designed for Romani children?

00:27:59-8

R: Not specifically for them. We try to aim all our projects at all children precisely for the sake of inclusion and enrichment. As for Roma projects, there are "Romské plamínky," but various groups of children also participate in them. We have "Barevná zeměkoule," which is a week-long project on multicultural education held every November. We go to Brno to the Museum of Romani Culture. We have annual discussions with Vietnamese and Ukrainian guests. We organize a multicultural picnic where parents prepare various dishes from different nations, and we invite oriental dances. We have Roma dances, but it's not only Roma girls who attend the dance classes. We have "Amaricup" for adults, which is a football tournament for amateur white and Roma players. Anyone who wants to play can participate. It takes place over the whole afternoon, with four adult teams and two children's teams who also wanted to play football. During breaks, our majorettes perform, and both Roma and white girls participate. Roma dances and cheerleading routines. Our girls are excellent at preparing a program for the whole afternoon, and they manage to include about twenty-eight performances, all from a school with thirty-seven students. I must say that we have a skilled educator who leads the majorettes and has five groups. She manages to secure registration fees for girls who are socially disadvantaged. We try various approaches to help them. That's "Amaricup," and from October 1st, we have entered the "Partnership without Prejudice" project, which is a European project funded by the European Union. It focuses on disadvantaged children. We submitted two projects, one in the first category for modern forms of education and one in the second category specifically for disadvantaged children. Unfortunately, it's the only project in which only disadvantaged children can participate. But we are glad that, as part of this project, the children will have laptops, more effective tutoring, professionally prepared individual educational plans, and sociotherapeutic workshops for children. We will financially secure the continuation of "Romské plamínky" through this project. There's also a beautiful aspect to this project, which is twenty-four mornings with parents over three years. We want to help them with societal interaction. This means offering advice on financial issues and demonstrating effective communication at government offices. We've witnessed several instances where communication is not effective because officials aren't very pleasant, and the parents become verbally aggressive, leading to further difficulties. We have about twelve topics we're working on with these parents.

T: Have you ever encountered a situation where children felt they were ethnically different and said, "I don't want to go there because..." Or do they not really address it among themselves?

R: Within the school, this isn't a problem. I recently spoke to a mother whose daughter transferred from our school in the fifth grade to a different school in the sixth grade. The mother said that within the first fourteen days, her daughter had to address this issue. "Gypsy, Gypsy, you're dirty." She cried about it at home. I asked the mother if she thought it would have been better for her daughter to start at the new school in the first grade. People often think they can't send their child to a small class or a different school because they fear the child will play for five years and then struggle in the sixth grade. The mother understood this very well. "No, now in the sixth grade, she's older, and at eleven or twelve, she'll handle it better than as a young child." There's really no problem within the school. Recently, we had a situation where a Roma boy knocked another boy's snack to the ground, or something happened. They had a little altercation, and the non-Roma boy cleverly hit the Roma boy where it hurts. While the Roma boy was cursing at him in a not-so-nice way, the non-Roma boy retorted, "You're a Gypsy and can't even afford a snack." I'd like to say one thing about this. We talk a lot about this with the children. Every morning, we have a discussion circle where we address various topics, including racial issues quite often. We see that the children sometimes express their parents' views in their words and actions. It's challenging to combat this, but I'm proud that the children, if nothing else, are starting to realize what is appropriate and what is not. What would be sufficient for Czech society in the next ten years is this. I believe that starting with multicultural education in high school is a complete joke. Because it happened to my girls when we joined this school in September, and there was no communication. They couldn't integrate. Next year, they will attend regularly, but for now, we're going back and forth between the two schools. They are very well-behaved, and no one minds that they are here. I'm just glad to have them with me. It happened that one little girl asked, "Why does our friend W. have such dark skin?" We talked about it, and the little girl said, "Oh, I thought her hands were dirty from playing in the sand." She's a four-year-old child. How can we start multicultural education in high school when four-year-old children are already thinking about it?

T: (Inaudible) they have four theories ready as to why her hands are dark. How does it work with parents? How do you engage and encourage them to get involved in the school? R: It's challenging. We started four years ago. I was here as a teacher, but the teaching staff was different, and the leadership was different. Four years ago, there were eleven fewer children, and the school looked like it was on the verge of closing. Our only option was to approach the parents and tell them that we would start doing something different, that we would somehow stand out. That was our only option; otherwise, we might as well have packed our bags. So we started organizing events for the public. We hold events every month. We send invitations to all the people in L. We set up an information box. We simply try to promote the school. We established an information box in the town square. Almost every town has an information bulletin, and now I know we have a new one for November. Every month, we appear in the listings of cultural events that parents can attend. Not just parents but anyone interested. We try to write articles for the local newspaper about interesting things happening at the school. They recently printed that we received the "Férová škola" (Fair School) certificate.

T: Is there something that resonates more with Roma parents, and something that they tend to ignore?

R: I can imagine that printed information tends to be ignored. Personal recommendations work better with Roma parents. One thing they are very appreciative of is the majorettes and Roma dances. When their children perform in these events, parents gather as a whole family in large numbers, and they take great pride in their kids. This is how you gain their favor. We were invited to the Color Meeting in P. in June. It's a music festival that focused on Roma culture this year, so they invited Roma dancers, and we were able to perform with our theater group. I must say that we have received awards at school, we have joined prestigious projects, and we had an excellent inspection report from the Czech School Inspectorate. But what we experienced on that Saturday at the Color Meeting when some Roma parents joined us and performed for the visitors, that was euphoric. I know that even now, when we meet, they remember that day, and it was tremendous. When Respekt wanted to do an interview, I offered to include Roma and non-Roma parents to express their views on children, education, and teaching methods because a lot has already been written about it. I'll contact them and see if they would be willing to meet the next day at 12:30 and discuss for two hours. After more than three years of hard work, where we started with no parents attending parent-teacher meetings or any events, and not participating in discussions, I couldn't even imagine it. Through these small steps, especially the events for the public, where their children can showcase their talents, we made progress.

T: That's where the change happens. I wonder if this approach would work in larger cities. After all, L. is small. People know each other, and they tend to communicate informally. Can you imagine it facing challenges or obstacles in larger cities, whether it would work or not?

R: We don't have many children from L. L. is a former village that is now part of S., and there's a strong village mentality. People don't want to be seen as from the village, so they send their children to the town's school. Most of the additional children we have in the last three or four years come from a greater distance. They are from S. or within a thirty-kilometer radius. But it's still true that S. isn't very big. I often think of Brno (pause). That's hard. Or when I think of the school where I used to teach. I just can't imagine that there would be two Roma assistants there. We have a Roma personal assistant, and we have an assistant pedagogue for socio-culturally disadvantaged children, so I'm not just talking without any basis. I know that these assistants can be found. If there were assistants, if there were two or three teachers who were more committed to this, it would work. Then it would only require them not to be discouraged by the majority of teachers at the school, who might find it challenging to understand.

T: Those who aren't very enthusiastic about it...

R: And those who are double-faced. I just can't imagine being somewhere else and it not working there. I can't imagine it. If it didn't work, I couldn't be there. The types of educators here, from the assistant to the educator, they're different. They're willing to take a chance.

T: You find a school where it works. Back to the parents. Do you sense that the school is important to them, and do they convey this importance to their children? Is school something they must attend?

R: It works a lot with the socially disadvantaged Slovak parents, as I call them. However, there's a problem there too, as they've understood that school is essential, but there's no personal example. This is where it's currently breaking for them. They understand that loans are a path to disaster, dependence on social benefits is no better, and the only way to get out of it is by having a job. They've already grasped that concept. Not all of them have internalized it, which is challenging to change in the middle of their lives at the age of forty, but they want to pass it on to their children. They may not know how, but the idea is there. I sense it. It's similar with the Olaši parents, but there, they still have this mentality: "We can manage quite well without school, we didn't need school, and we believe in ourselves so much that we can still provide for our children." For example, the Roma personal assistant, the one I mentioned earlier, was raised like a baby. I think she would be upset if she heard me say this. From my perspective, that's how I see it. This leads to communication problems. For example, when we go somewhere with the school, she is unhappy about it a week in advance because she'll be out in the forest or somewhere. She needs a lot of rest and relaxation; she's often tired. We are much quicker. I don't mean this negatively; it's just a different type. She's only been here for two months, and we're learning. We're very glad she's here, we chose her because she volunteered at a charity for mentally disabled individuals, which was a significant qualification for us. But it will take us a while to find common ground. If I may pause for a moment to talk about her. R: She can enrich us with things we may not be fully aware of. It happened recently during a meeting with parents, a student for whom she is a personal assistant, her, and teachers. We encountered a problem where parents were gradually forming a relationship with her and often communicated with her, which was nice. But we felt that it could be dangerous for them to exchange information about the student's education among themselves.

T: Information that should be shared by you.

R: Information that should be shared by a qualified teacher. So we needed to discuss this during the meeting, and we realized that we hadn't considered the emotional bond that was forming. We had talked for an hour about education, and then we asked the boy and her how they saw it. They talked about their relationship and how they kept a diary, about when he hugged her and when he wrote something nice about her in his diary. There were three teachers sitting there, and we felt embarrassed. It begins and ends there. When someone from the majority population can pause for a moment and admit that Roma children and often Roma parents can enrich them in some way. I enjoy working with Roma children because I'm an emotional and somewhat hysterical person myself, so I'm glad I'm not alone in this. It's the same with those parents when you're in town, and they greet you from a distance, waving at you. You sit down with them on a bench, and it's half an hour of sincere conversation about the children. It's pure honesty, even if you have to overlook occasional swear words or someone smoking in front of a baby's face, or maybe some of the children aren't dressed properly for temperatures below freezing, or that their pasta hasn't been wiped clean for a while. So, when you rise above these things, and I don't want to generalize, of course, not everyone is like that, you realize that it was a genuine half-hour when you didn't play any games, didn't think about what to say, how to hide things, what to emphasize, or what to downplay, as you often do with children who, in quotation marks, represent the school, with the intelligent, college-educated parents. You have to be careful about what you say, whether you're placing the right emphasis on their child, whether you're explaining things properly, what additional workload you've given them during lessons, and whether you're correctly integrating knowledge in various interdisciplinary activities.

T: It's about intermediacy and a bit of pressure for the children to be a year better and to learn more each year. When you strive for an inclusive school, do you perceive any systemic obstacles? Why do some other schools not address it at all? Because there may be obstacles that require a lot of effort and thinking about how to do it, and it's complicated. Is there something you can imagine that, if it didn't exist, perhaps legally speaking, it would be much easier? Or something that could be done to make everything work better? Are you facing any financial problems?

R: I want to talk about that. I don't think we encounter any obstacles (pause). When Ondřej Liška was the Minister of Education, we actually felt privileged. I think it would make the situation easier if it could continue like this, where I can request funds from projects for inclusive education for teacher bonuses, which were generous this year. Unfortunately, I don't think the development program will repeat, but the teachers truly deserved those bonuses. It's not just about the money; it's about the expression of gratitude. We talked about it with the teachers, that it's nice to receive some extra money, especially before Christmas, that's true. But the teachers talked about it as satisfaction. It's like, "You're the one from that Roma school." Whereas with a teacher being able to boast that they received a bonus from an inclusive education project, it's understandable to everyone. It might sound silly, but that's how it is. It's the same with the development program for assistant pedagogues for socio-culturally disadvantaged children. It's the same with the development program for multicultural education, and it's the same with the European Social Fund grant. We definitely can't complain about money; quite the opposite.

T: Do you think there are plenty of opportunities, and it's more about the motivation of schools?

R: For example, I had an experience where the headmistress of a nearby village asked me about something because, from a grant, we obtained playground equipment in front of the school, and we renovated the entire garden. It was also related to inclusive education because we committed to making the garden accessible to the public, as some children don't have stimulating environments. The headmistress of the nearby school asked me how we managed to do it, thinking that the city had provided us with the money as the founder. I explained it to her, and she said, "Oh, yes, you also got that money for the Gypsies, I see." Like it wasn't worth it to me; I sensed that from the conversation. It's a sad chapter in this story here.

T: According to you, it takes enthusiasm and commitment to break through and...

R: It's definitely possible. I have to say, for myself and for the environment I'm in, I don't perceive any obstacles. Except that we do struggle with the reputation of being a "Gypsy school" among some people. But as I see it, on the other hand, some parents bring their children from afar, parents who think more about education. After four years, I can say it's like a zero-sum game—those who leave the school and those who come in the opposite direction. Perhaps even more children come. I just can't think of any obstacles. I still think about the question of whether this could be done in a larger school. When I analyze it, let's say I'm a teacher, I taught fourth grade at the time. Let's say I was an enthusiast for Roma children. I definitely believe I could have convinced two or three more teachers to join me. Applying for a grant for a pedagogue for socially disadvantaged children is not difficult at all; for multicultural education, it's a bit harder. Maybe this year, we didn't get that money, so it's not entirely certain. The European project was complicated. For inclusive education, it wasn't difficult at all. There are other projects for the Roma community in the region, directly from the Ministry of Education, and even from the Ministry of Culture, so I can easily imagine that, as a teacher, I could secure the funds. I could imagine gathering a few children from different classes for a club, like Roma dances or a historical club related to that ethnicity in some way. We already have quite a developed volunteer activity here. Last year, two high school students came to help us, and parents help us in some clubs, so I could definitely find two more parents or volunteers from ninth graders or high schools, and we would have five adults. With that, tutoring could be done. Maybe I wouldn't convince teachers to make individual educational plans because that's a complex matter. But I could work with parents, and I could support those children in tutoring. I just don't think it's impossible.

T: Another thing that comes to mind, when you were talking about raising funds for programs specifically for Roma parents, where you discussed issues, did any connections or relationships develop between Roma and non-Roma parents? Did they meet here, and are there already some relationships and connections, or is it more like everyone on their own? I have experience with Waldorf pedagogy, where there's a strong emphasis on creating a community of parents. Here, it might be more challenging to unite parents. It's diversified; everyone approaches children and school a bit differently.

R: The discussion with R. is a recent development, a month, three weeks ago, and it was touching how parents shared their experiences and supported each other in many ways. The conclusion of that discussion was that they shared experiences regarding religious education and exchanged phone numbers for someone to baptize their child here and there, and that was magical. After three years of Amaricapo, it's starting to break through a bit, as parents no longer sit strictly divided in the audience as Roma and non-Roma. I see some progress. We started with the fact that there was a theater performance downstairs, and a non-Roma mother deliberately chose to sit separately from the Roma mothers. So, we've come a long way since four years ago.

T: Children notice it in public, so perhaps the mother wanted to sit separately, but she was already thinking about how it would look.

R: Something is happening. Especially with those parents who came to us in the first and second grades, parents I sometimes simplify when talking about them, I call them "vegetarians."

R: Alternative parents.

T: Such alternative parents. I've narrowed it down because the children have problems with lunch. I don't mean it in a negative way. We certainly tolerate and try to accommodate any differences. So that we teachers know because when we need to describe a certain group - you can talk to them at this time, those have to be invited to an extra meeting, so we have them divided.