Social and ethnic group membership among students in a Czech lower secondary school

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ABSTRACT: This article examines social and ethnic group membership among sixth-grade students at a Czech lower secondary school whose student population is predominantly heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity. The main focus is on group membership in the sixth grade, which is considered as the worst class at school and which is attended by several Roma boys and girls. Special attention is paid to the boundary constructions in the groups of children from an anthropological perspective and interactionism. The article is based on qualitative, and ethnographic fieldwork. The central method of the fieldwork was observation. This method was partially supplemented by materials from the school evaluations and interviews with teachers and other respondents during the field research. Research findings derive from fieldwork conducted at the school that is perceived as problematic by local residents. The school is located near a socially excluded locality in the Czech Republic where a large number of the buildings are in deplorable condition, with many apartments unoccupied. Many city residents consider the locality to be a "Roma ghetto". The article contributes to understanding the grouping and social and interethnic communication among twelve-year-old students. The article sheds light on the benefits of being in a group and how students and groups communicate with each other.
KEYWORDS: Identity, interethnic relations, Czech Roma student, educational inequalities, social exclusion

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I examine social and ethnic group membership among students at a Czech lower secondary school near what has been termed an "excluded locality." In this area many children live in non-residential or otherwise unstable conditions, and the educational failure rate of students is significantly high (PAQ Research 2020: 21).

A significant number of Roma students attend this ISCED 2011 level 2 lower secondary school. Many non-Roma students eventually leave this school and opt for other schools with a lower or no proportion of Roma students. The school is perceived as problematic by many local residents, with many city residents considering the locality to be a "Roma ghetto" and have indicated negative opinions, i.e. that the excluded locality "should be surrounded by barbed wire."

This article is based on qualitative and ethnographic research based on the method of observation, a "hallmark of both anthropological and sociological studies" (Kawulich 2005). *Students were observed during lessons as well as outside the classroom during free periods.* The observation was partially supplemented by interviews with teachers and other field research respondents.

The primary theoretical framework of the article includes the concepts of educational inequalities, interethnic relations, identity, and social exclusion. Inequalities in education are defined here in terms of educational opportunities, education participation, quality teaching, selection, and peer relations (Thompson 2019, Bhopal et al. 2014, Lambert and Griffiths 2018, Bukowski et al. 2020). Special attention is devoted to social and educational inequalities which affect the group dynamics and atmosphere in the classroom (Bhopal et al. 2014, Lambert and Griffiths 2018). From the point of view of interethnic relations and communication (Eriksen 2010; Brubaker 2006; Jenkins 2014, 1997), social and interethnic relations among groups of children which co-create various aspects of sociality in the educational settings are presented here.

Identity has been described as a multi-layered concept (see Eriksen and Schober 2016; Eriksen 2010) In this research ethnic identity will be explored, with ethnicity in this context perceived as consisting of a distinction between "us" and "them." Ethnicity is relational, situational and is created by social contact; it is a social construct and a social concept (Eriksen 2010). It is understood more as a process and an aspect of a relationship, rather than a characteristic of an individual or a group (Barth 1969). According to Lawler (2014: 9) "identity works as an object (or a set of related objects) in the social world: it works to delineate both persons and types of person, and to differentiate between them." It is important to keep in mind that "our identity locates us in the social world, thoroughly affecting everything we do, feel, say, and think in our lives" (Newman 2018: 115). In the text below, I focus especially on sameness and difference, as these two concepts offer complementary perspectives on identity. "The first of these allows for individuals to imagine themselves as a group, while the second procures social distance between those who perceive themselves as unlike. Even together, however, these concepts are inadequate to capture the power relation in which identities are enmeshed. For sameness and difference are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction" (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 369).

Social exclusion is another important research term in this context. Exclusion takes many forms (see IBE-UNESCO 2021), although here it is perceived as a mechanism for determining who belongs or does not belong to a group, i.e. what identity is denied to the student and what identity is assigned to the learner (Mareš & Sirovátka 2008). In the Czech context, the term social exclusion has been closely related to the concept of

excluded locality. This territorialization has been defined as "space (a house, street or neighborhood) with a high concentration of people in whom we can identify the signs linked to social exclusion. The surrounding populations denote these places symbolically as negative" (GAC 2015: 16). Analyses of putatively socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic (GAC 2015: 19) have pointed out that social excluded localities are seen almost exclusively as Roma localities, even those in which Roma do not constitute a statistical majority. The boundaries of these places can also symbolic (e.g. the locality is perceived as "a bad area," "dangerous place," "ghetto"). In these localities, the majority of the adults have only a basic level of education and on average around 80% of the population is unemployed.

The article builds on ethnographic studies from school settings. The study of the school collective has a long tradition in the Czech Republic, not only thanks to the influence of the Prague Group of School Ethnography (1995, 2001, 2004, 2005), but also due to the first Czech work on the sociology of education by Jaroslav Šíma (1938).[1] Among other things, this sociologist was concerned with how children's groups form, develop and disappear in school life (see 1938: 86). Šíma described how most school groups are formed according to the rule of conformity and contrast (1938: 88-89): "Children are grouped together who have the same position in the class, children of the same interests, the same intellectual level, excellent or bad students, children from good families or children left mostly on the streets (...). Less frequent, but nevertheless obvious, are groups in which contrasts are brought together, usually by connecting the weaker to the stronger. Thus groups of children are formed, one of whom is prosperous and the other or others join him, either to help them or to let some of his brilliance fall on them, or finally they approach him because of the desire that such a one should be their friend."[2]

In this article I will try to show how some of these ideas of Jaroslav Šíma are still valid after more than eighty years. I will focus on the sixth grade in one ISCED 2011 level 2 lower secondary school, in which the above considerations can be delineated.

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[1] Jaroslav Šíma's book has its strengths and weaknesses (see Nešpor 2011: 974-975). It is interesting to observe that already in 1938 significant reflection was taking place on the relationship between poverty and school success: "we know how great the correlation is between poverty, family and poor school performance. However, children are mostly unaware of it. Poor children are not bound by the knowledge that their fathers are laborers; they are bound by the fact that they are not very good at school. They are alone in the street all the afternoon, and they can play together, and their mischief now and then commands the respect of their classmates, while other individuals achieve this by excellent grades" (Šíma 1938: 89).

[2] According to Šíma (1938: 90), groups of girls were more determined by school relations, while boys' groups were more determined by out-of-school relations. Furthermore, girls formed more groups than boys, and their groups were stronger and more stable. The fact that girls formed smaller groups – often pairs – played a role, while boys tended to form more multi-person groups. Šíma described how small groups were generally more closed, while larger groups were looser and more changeable. In addition, groups formed on the basis of contrast tended to be less permanent than groups formed according to the rule of conformity. It would be interesting to carry out research to determine how children's groups have evolved in comparison with Jaroslav Šíma's findings from 1938.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative ethnographic research study was based on the method of observation and was partially supplemented by nine interviews with teachers and other respondents during the field research. The respondents included representatives of municipalities, employees of non-profit organizations, employees of pedagogical-psychological centers as well as residents of the research locality.

Materials from the school evaluations were also used and analysed in the research. The school evaluation was based on a questionnaire survey. The main authors of the school evaluation were Jan Sýkora and Jakub Drbohlav. I kept in close touch with both of them on the evaluation. Data collection for the school evaluation took place in the computer centre (see subsection A note on methodology: How the students filled in the questionnaires). The results of the school evaluation were available to teachers and the principal.[3]

The research was carried out in the autumn of 2018 in three school classes within a primary school and lower secondary school – one first grade, one third grade (see author 2022), and one sixth grade class.[4] These classes were selected after having a discussion with the principal and teachers. In this article, I describe only selected aspects of the school life of students from the sixth grade.[5] A total of 15 students were observed in the sixth grade – 9 girls and 6 boys.

My research follows all ethical principles, the guidelines, and the code of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology (CASA 2020). My membership in the CASA commits me to adhere to the CASA Code of Ethics, which consists of principles of research work along with publishing research findings, relations with subjects as well as responsibility to the public and students. I placed special emphasis on the protection of the participants' privacy, safety, and confidentiality. I did not use any data recording devices and I attempted to respect the environment and cultural values of the participants.

I put the emphasis on responsibility, anonymity, openness, awareness, fairness, sincerity, credibility of information obtained, protection of confidential communication, compliance with obligations and non-misuse of findings). In order to protect the identities of the students and teachers involved in my research, their names have been changed and coded. I straightforwardly described the subject of my research to the participants. I have chosen not to indicate the name of the school nor the locality in which I carried out the research.

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[3] I would like to thank Jan Sýkora and Jakub Drbohlav for the valuable materials from their school evaluations. Excerpts are included here with the permission of both authors. These materials helped me to better orientate myself at the school and among the school actors I worked with. I would also like to thank the principal and teachers for their kind helpfulness and willingness to assist me during my fieldwork.

[4] I had intended to continue the research in 2020, but due to circumstances associated with COVID-19 the research has been postponed. The work is set to continue in 2022.

[5] To some extent, this sixth grade class is also an example of how the third grade class may develop in the future (see author 2022).

THE CONTEXT OF THE SITUATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN TERMS OF ONE SCHOOL IN THE VICINITY OF AN EXCLUDED LOCALITY

The research took place in the Czech Republic in the town of Kruštíkov, which has less than 12,000 inhabitants.[6] One locality in the vicinity can be described as socially excluded. A large number of the buildings are in deplorable condition, with many apartments unoccupied. Many city residents consider the locality to be a "Roma ghetto" and believe that the excluded locality "should be surrounded by barbed wire." While not only Roma live in this excluded locality, according to estimates Roma make up one-third to one-half of the total population. One school is in operation near this district and the excluded locality.[7]

The teaching staff at the school consists of a total of 30 educators, with an enrollment of about 350 students. The average number of students per class is 22.6 in lower secondary school. Out of a total of 160 students, 42 finished with honours (with top marks), 108 passed and 10 failed.

The school is perceived by many local residents as problematic. A number of parents express opinions such as that "there are so many problems at the school that a social worker could move there" (Parent 1. Personal communication. Interview by author, lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 25. 10. 2018).

The school management is aware of some problems and for this reason the school cooperates closely with experts in the prevention of risky behavior. These experts are from an NGO. They have been collaborating with schools for a long time. These experts focus on the use of experience-based methods in the pedagogical environment. Through the implementation of programs for class groups, these experts assist teachers in attempting to integrate socially excluded students and students with a higher risk of social exclusion into the school community. They help to build a positive classroom climate and set up equal relationships among all students. These experts are also involved in the training of the teaching staff and in the validation of evaluation tools.

The evaluation methods described below attempts to reveal how the school is perceived by the students themselves and how students evaluate the different characteristics of school life (see Figure 1).

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[6] The name of the locality is fictitious.

[7] In the Czech Republic children aged 6–15 attend basic schools that have two levels. The first level, comparable to primary schools, comprises five grades; the second level comprises four grades and is comparable to lower secondary schools (see The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2011).
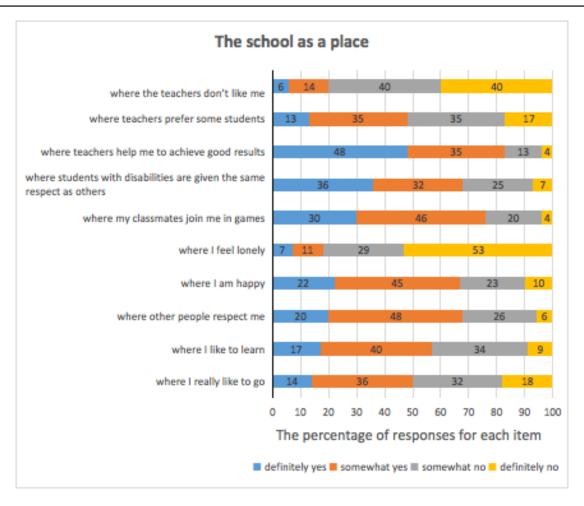
The school as a place

Item	definitely yes	somewhat yes	somewhat no	definitely no
where the teachers don't like me	6	14	40	40
where teachers prefer some students	13	35	35	17
where teachers help me to achieve good results	48	35	13	4
where students with disabilities are given the same respect as others	36	32	25	7
where my classmates join me in games	30	46	20	4
where I feel lonely	7	11	29	53
where I am happy	22	45	23	10
where other people respect me	20	48	26	6
where I like to learn	17	40	34	9
where I really like to go	14	36	32	18

The percentage of responses for each item

■ definitely yes ■ somewhat yes ▨ somewhat no ■ definitely no

Figure 1: How do students evaluate the different characteristics of school life?[8]
* Source: The figure was made by the author and it is based on the school evaluations

The evaluation tool indicated that 67% of students are happy at school, 57% consider school to be a place where they enjoy learning, and 83% believe that the teachers help them to achieve good results. In contrast, 18% of students feel lonely at school, 33% are not happy at school, and 20% believe that the teachers do not like them.

In comparison to Figure 1, it is possible to look at the evaluation results from the sixth grade where I conducted the research (see Figure 2). The results of the questionnaire show that 62% of sixth-grade students are happy at school, 78% consider school to be a place where they like to learn, and 89% believe that teachers help them to do well. In contrast, 17% of students feel lonely at school, 38% are not happy at school and 33% believe that teachers do not like them (see Figure 2 below).[9]

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[8] The percentage of "definitely yes" "somewhat yes" "somewhat no" and "definitely no" responses for each item is plotted in stripes.

[9] The results from the sixth grade may be somewhat skewed and the data should therefore be taken with a grain of salt (see subsection A note on methodology: How the students filled in the questionnaires).
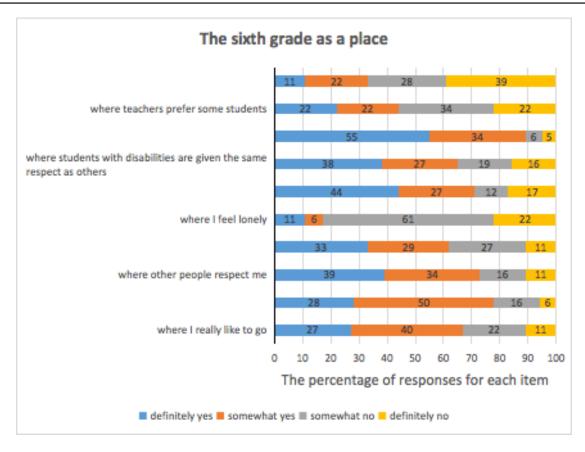
The sixth grade as a place

where teachers prefer some students	11	22	28	39
	22	22	34	22
where students with disabilities are given the same respect as others	55	34	6	5
	38	27	19	16
where I feel lonely	44	27	12	17
	11	6	61	22
where other people respect me	33	29	27	11
	39	34	16	11
where I really like to go	28	50	16	6
	27	40	22	11

The percentage of responses for each item

■ definitely yes   ■ somewhat yes   ■ somewhat no   ■ definitely no

Figure 2: How do six-grade students evaluate characteristic of school life?
* Source: The figure was made by the author and it is based on the school evaluations

THE CONTEXT OF THE SITUATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN TERMS OF ROMA EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Among the 350 students who attend the school, there is a significant number of Roma students. In the Czech Republic, the number of schools with a growing concentration and a dominant share of Roma students is gradually increasing in schools that operate in the vicinity of excluded localities. In 2018 approximately 830 socially excluded localities with a total of more than 127,000 people were designated in the Czech Republic (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic 2019: 25). Compared to 2006, the total number of localities has nearly tripled, with the number of inhabitants living increasing by nearly one half. In 2006, between 60,000 and 80,000 people were living in 300 excluded localities (GAC 2015).

The number of schools with a growing concentration of Roma students is gradually increasing due to the fact that non-Roma students leave these schools and opt for other schools with a lower or no proportion of Roma boys and girls (Gac 2010: 23; People in Need 2009: 80). In the Czech Republic, in situations in which five Roma students are in one class, on average more than half of the parents will consider moving their child into another class (*Čada* & Hůle 2019: 115). Roma are among the groups that are negatively viewed by parents, with their presence seen as problematic by about a quarter of the interviewed parents (*Čada* & Hůle 2019: 113).

There have been conflicts between Roma and Non-Roma children at the school, which are perceived by children in several classes as conflicts between "whites and gypsies" (from interviews with several students in different classes). During these conflicts and quarrels, non-Roma children most often refer to Roma as "dirt" and scold them to "go to work." The Roma children, in turn, call the non-Roma children "racists, white pigs" and threaten to send their families after them. Some non-Roma children have claimed that they were attacked by Roma because they had a "white face." Currently, tensions between Roma and non-Roma students can be observed in several classrooms:

> I would call our class almost racist, of course, the Roma would not be lynched, but they would not receive praise. This behavior was compounded by a conflict between one girl in the lower year because she didn't want to give a cigarette to a Roma girl, so ten Roma girls waited for her after school and beat her up (Student 1. Key informant. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 12. 12. 2018).

Not only social and ethnic problems can be found among the children at the school. The big problem is in the area of education itself, as a large number of the Roma children at the school have educational problems and achieve poor grades.

In the Czech Republic 38% of Roma students from excluded localities do not complete their primary and lower secondary school studies (GAC 2010). After the ninth grade, only 14 % of students continue to upper secondary education with a *Maturita* examination. Roma students are much more likely than majority students to choose upper secondary education with a VET certificate. Many young Roma students do not even finish their schooling (GAC 2010; *Amnesty International 2015; Amnesty International* and European Roma 2012).

Among other things, this is due to the fact that the Czech education system is facing significant inequalities in the field of education (see the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2019). Significant inequalities exist with regard to the quality of Czech schools, both in the form of regional inequalities and inequalities within regions (The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2019). The education system is facing problems due to the aging generation of teachers, the lack of systemic support for enhancing the quality of teachers and principals in schools as well as limited research in the field of education (EDUin 2019, The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2016). In the Czech Republic, the strong influence of socio-economic status on educational opportunities and educational mobility can be noted (PAQ Research 2020). The family background and the geographical area in which the child lives fundamentally influence the child's development and life trajectory (PAQ Research 2020).

One response to the educational inequalities has been inclusive reform, which has been gradually coming into effect since the 2016/2017 school year through Czech legislation. This reform was intended to reduce educational inequalities, but the efforts cannot be seen in terms of black and white. Thanks to the initiatives, numerous support measures for students have been introduced and the number of teaching assistants has been increased; whereas a total of 10,400 assistants worked in schools in

the 2015/2016 school year, their number has now doubled.[10] Yet on the other hand, in hindsight this systemic change has not been well prepared, explained or fully accepted by the public and teachers. Up to 61.3% of primary and lower secondary school teachers struggled with implementing inclusive education (Pivarč 2020: 77). Inclusion efforts have produced a number of problems since the beginning of their implementation, e.g. the amount of paperwork has skyrocketed (Pivarč 2020: 136). As a result, schools differ in their approaches to and views of inclusion and segregation. There are big differences among schools in terms of how school principals talk about inclusion, how they perceive it, and how they assess the climate in their particular school (Moree 2019: 25). Specifically, schools in excluded localities have different relationships to inclusion than do schools at a greater distance from excluded localities (Moree 2019: 6).

SIXTH GRADE: "THE WORST CLASS AT SCHOOL"

> Inspections force us to make all children be successful, but if some don't want to work at all, how can they achieve success? (Teacher 5. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 11. 12. 2018)

The sixth grade in the school under observation is attended by 15 children – 9 girls and 6 boys. Among them are 6 Roma children – 4 girls and 2 boys. 18 children had attended the class, but three girls have moved on to secondary school. At the moment it is "the worst class at the school" (Teacher 1, teacher 2, teacher 3, teacher 4. Personal communication. Interview by author, lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 26. 10. 2018).

The students in the class are aware of this and ironically refer to themselves as a "decent class." In December, after four months of teaching, the teacher changed the seating plan for the fifteenth time because of the bad behavior of some students: "I would need four assistants (…). It just all came together in my classroom" (Teacher 1, a 31-year-old teacher of the sixth grade. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 11. 12. 2018). Students do not bring the required materials to school. Half the class does not bring the assigned book to reading lessons. For geometry, the students do not bring a pencil or ruler. One of the Roma girls was repeating the grade. Currently, two students (Emanuela and Valeria) are at risk of repeating sixth grade.

"Together, the students make a wild class, but individually each learner is friendly (…). Some are hard-working, others are not. Some are disappointed with our school system. They would like to learn something new, but they are afraid to fail" (Teacher 2, 47-year-old teacher of history and art education. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 22. 11. 2018). Several children show low self-confidence or deep self-doubt. They struggle with issues of

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[10] In Czech schools, a teaching assistant provides support to the lead teacher in the education of students with special educational needs (The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2016b).

inferiority, for which some educators have assigned co-responsibility to their class teacher, who also taught these students from first to fourth grade. She "had favorites and didn't like the rest" (Teacher 1, teacher 2, teacher 4. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 11. 12. 2018).

GROUPING AT SIXTH GRADE AND CLASSROOM CONTEXTS

In this section of the text, I would like to point out how sixth grade students are divided into groups. In this regard, I recognize that "the relationships of group members consist of a set of interrelated and hierarchically organized positions and roles. These positions and roles reflect how the individual student is accepted and valued by the group" (Hutyrová 2019: 142).

Based on my long-term observation and interviews, I believe that the collective divides itself into four groups:

Group 1 - non-Roma girls

Group 2 - non-Roma boys

Group 3 - Roma girls

Group 4 - Roma boys and one non-Roma student

The distinction between "us" and "them" is contextually determined. Within the classroom, there is a strong separation of students into several sub-groups whose members are holding together against others within the class. These groups are sometimes antagonistic. At other times, they cooperate with each other – for example, groups collaborate in physical education when they define themselves against the neighboring class and try to win over them in ball games (football, floorball, basketball).

What is important, however, is that each group has its own structure and identity as well as different interests.[11] "Identification and interests are not easily distinguished. How I identify myself has a bearing on how I define my interests. How I define my interests may encourage me to identify myself in particular ways. How other people identify me has a bearing on how they define my interests, and, indeed, their own interests. (…) How I identify others may have a bearing on which interests I pursue" (Jenkins 2014: 8).
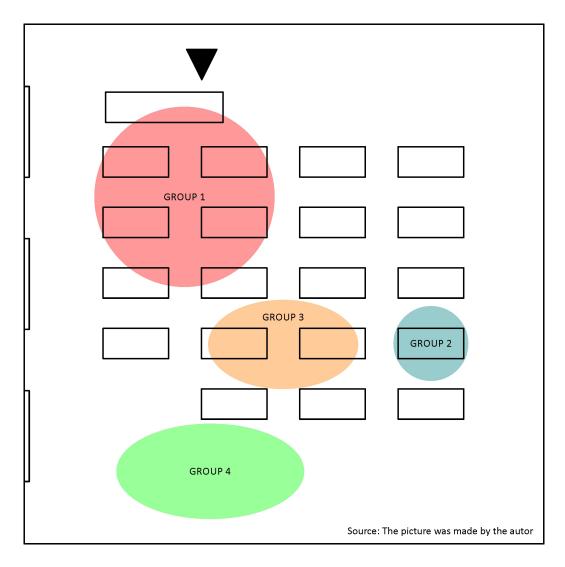
Each group reflects socio-economic differences, differences in school achievement, differing goals and ideas about life and education, differences in family background, differences in school attendance as well as career aspirations. During my research, I observed these differences on a daily basis:

In the Czech language lesson, students write a test that includes the previous months' material. The test should take the whole lesson. However, after five minutes, Emanuel has finished and is getting bored. At first, he tried to look at the others, but gave up soon and started to crumple up the test paper into a ball.

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[11] Other basic group phenomena such as group norms, cohesiveness and group culture are closely related to group structure (Lovaš 2019: 240).

After a while, he was joined by Bedřich, who imitated him. They both rolled up the test paper and they both laughed about it. The teacher noticed this and asked them if they were finished. She understood everything. The boys fell silent, uncrumpling their paper and lay down on the desk. Shortly afterward, two Roma girls finished their test. They lay down on the desk as well. They were quiet in order not to disturb anyone. The teacher said to one of them, "Val, don't give up and continue writing the test. I need you to figure it out, so come on." Valerie, however, made no more signs of writing. The remaining Roma children wrote the test for an hour (observation records from the *field diary, the* lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, *19. 11. 2018*).

Each student identifies more or less with one of the four groups and adopts a group identity. Each group spends time during free periods in a different way and in a different place. The classroom is divided into four spaces according to group affiliation – see the Picture 1 below.

Source: The picture was made by the autor

Picture 1: The classroom space

During breaks, the Roma girls meet at two desks in the middle row. Group 4 always heads to the back of the classroom, where they most often play music loudly from their mobile phones.[12] They tend to stay near the windows, and sometimes they tease the other group of boys. They meet at the fourth desk in the right row, and when conflict arises they follow the dictum: "let cooler heads prevail." This means that when they are being teased, they leave the classroom environment, and go for a walk in the hallway in front of the classroom. They are trying to avoid group 4 and avoid conflicts. The boundaries among the sixth grade groups are firmly fixed, with each group living to an extent in its own social bubble.

THE FIRST GROUP

The non-Roma girls spend all their breaks together. In terms of school success, they are among the most successful and hardest working. At break time they often prepare for the next lesson if there is a chance that the teacher will examine them. Together with the non-Roma boys in the other group, they are interested not only in the marks they will achieve in their report cards, but also in what they can do to improve. Based on my research, I assume that they are more active in terms of "help-seeking" (see Calarco 2011). For example, when the history teacher announced to the children "whoever is interested in their marks as they stand now can come and see them" (Teacher 2, observation records from the *field diary*, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 20. 11. 2018), only students from the first and second groups came. This speaks to some extent about the attitude and relationship to education that these students have. At the same time, however, it is telling that many children are already burned out by sixth grade. They already know by then how they are doing and that their chances of significant improvement are minimal.

THE SECOND GROUP

The non-Roma girls are closest to the three non-Roma boys who make up the Group 2 in the class. These boys have good marks on their report cards and always spend their breaks together. At break time they usually have one goal, and that is to avoid the students from the fourth group who generally seek to hurt them. Emanuel from the fourth group seeks them out and often attacks them physically and verbally.

Naturally, there are sometimes minor conflicts between boys. In all the school classes, there is occasional teasing or friendly banter. However, there is no teasing between the third and fourth groups and there is usually no laughter among them. It is more like bullying, which is quite different from playful banter. As Kolář and NIDV (2016: 20) point out, "if I tease my friend, I expect it to be fun not only for me but also for him. But if I see that he doesn't take it as fun, that he is hurt, then I feel sorry and apologize to him. It's different from bullying. The aggressor wants to hurt the other person. He's happy about it. He won't apologize. He repeats his behavior and usually

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[12] With all the music during the break, the classroom seems like a disco. The issue of mobile phone usage at schools is a currently a widely-discussed topic in the Czech education system.

escalates the violence."

For example, during practical lessons, I had the opportunity to observe the boys as they migrated to the workroom. The teacher was discussing wood sawing methods. The students had the task of making a throwing cube. During this lesson, I observed name-calling, physical aggression, threats, and even specific situations in which boys from the fourth group attacked boys from the second group.

> Emanuel picked up a file full of sawdust. He watched the third group students. He waited until they weren't looking in his direction. Then he quickly took off and rubbed the file hard on the sleeve of one of his classmates. After a few minutes, he was imitated by Bedřich. He walked past the students from the third group. In his hand, there was a file full of sawdust. He turned to his classmate and blew all the sawdust from the file into his face (observation records from the *field diary, the lower secondary* school in the town of Kruštíkov, *22. 11. 2018*).

THE THIRD GROUP

Group 3 consists of Roma girls who are distinguished from the others by their different interests and their Roma ethnolect of the Czech language.[13] During my observation, they often talk about fashion, beauty, and clothes. On break, they do their make-up, eyelashes, and lips. They admire the teacher who dresses nice and is beautiful. One such teacher was supervising the girls, who came up to her to ask her opinion on fashion and to tell her she is "really hot and beautiful" (Member of the third group, observation records from the *field diary*, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 4. 12. 2018). One girl is obese and has the worst position in the group of Roma girls. This is due to the fact that this group has strict criteria for what pretty girls look like. They have ideas about who looks pretty and this girl fulfils these ideals the least among them.[14] The Roma girls are close to the fourth group and also get along relatively well with the non-Roma girls.

THE FOURTH GROUP

The fourth group is composed of the Roma boys Emanuel and Zdeněk and the non-Roma boy Bedřich. Their association is perceived by their classmates as a "black and white friendship," i.e. a situation where a non-Roma student is friends with a Roma student. "If you are friends with Roma and something goes wrong, according to your classmates, your failure is justified because you hang out with Roma and end up like them. This is the evaluation you get from your classmates. You will start to be excluded from the group if you are friends with Roma students a lot and if you start to adopt their behavior" (Student 2. Key informant. Personal communication. Interview by au-

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[13] For more information on the Roma ethnolect in the Czech language and u*sing Romani in language socialization in a Czech Roma family*, see Bořkovcová (2007) and Kubaník (2016).

[14] In the context of this example, it should be emphasized that the attitudes of our classmates are key to us. "We more or less unconsciously see ourselves as others see us" (Mead 2017: 43-44). This is closely related to our self-awareness (Koukolík 2013, Kohnstamm 2007, Roessler a Eilan 2003).

thor, the lower seconday school in the town of Kruštíkov, 22. 11. 2018).

Emanuel, Zdeněk and Bedřich are "the worst kids in the worst class" (Teacher 1, 31-year-old teacher of sixth grade. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 20. 11. 2018). Emanuel is doing very badly. He is described as a "troublemaker." According to the teachers, he is aggressive, rude, and vulgar, often disturbing and provoking the teachers. He often makes various loud noises during class. He has a poor behavioral mark and has received many comments and warnings from teachers. He physically and verbally attacks his classmates and does not prepare for lessons. "He doesn't want to write anything down and gives up a lot of things in advance" (Teacher 1, 31-year-old teacher of sixth grade. Personal communication. Interview by author, the basic school in the town of Kruštíkov, 20. 11. 2018). He often lies on his desk during class. An effort has been made to assign him a teaching assistant.

Bedřich "is a troublemaker and is close to other troublemakers" (Teacher 4, 50-year-old teacher of physical education. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 22. 11. 2018). "He doesn't have good marks, that's why he's friends with Roma" (Teacher 2, 47-year-old teacher of history and art education. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 20. 11. 2018). He does not listen to the teacher and he behaves rudely. It is his second year at the school. He has ADHD and an individual education plan. Zdeněk mostly listens to the teacher, i.e. he is not rude like Emanuel and Bedřich. He does not use vulgar words like his friends from the fourth group. Unlike those two, he has at least a partial interest in his studies, although according to his teacher: "he is not very good at learning." (Teacher 1, 31-year-old teacher of sixth grade. Personal communication. Interview by author, the lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, 20. 11. 2018).
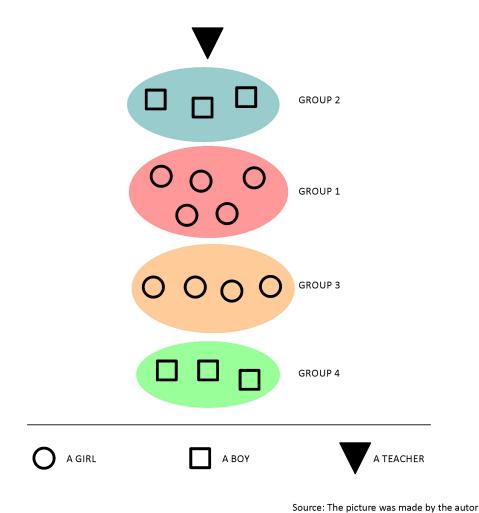
Group 2 hates this group, as do the group of non-Roma girls, who refer to the boys from the fourth group as "pigs," especially when they do something disgusting (e.g. when Emanuel and Bedřich pretended to have sex in front of the girls). Neither Emanuel nor Bedřich like it when girls call them pigs, which is a reason they sometimes threaten them: "Shut up or I'll beat you up." In my observations, this behavior remained only threats and intimidation, i.e. the girls were not physically harmed.

Nevertheless, bullying in the sixth grade, various threats and intimidation greatly undermines positive communication in the classroom and reinforces the social and symbolic boundaries between groups, especially the boundaries around the fourth group. Dagmar Šafránková (2019: 295) points out that other group members who, although not directly involved in the bullying but were spectators and witnesses of the bullying, experience disillusionment about the functioning of the social group and society. They lose their faith in justice and their sense of safety and protection in this society. They realize that moral norms are violated with impunity. The educational and socializing function of the school is disrupted. This leads to students withdrawing into themselves and their own groups. The group they belong to offers them a relative sense of safety, protection, and support.
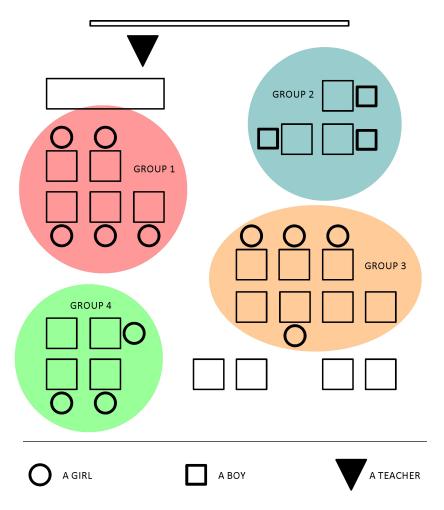
COMMUNICATION AMONG STUDENTS

During my research I was interested in the social distance between students. I made field notes with regard to who was willing to interact and communicate with whom, for example as depicted in this record of the observation of this art lesson:

Students attend art lessons in a special classroom equipped with folding benches and tables suitable for drawing and painting. They walk to this special classroom with the teacher. First, the students have to line up in their classroom behind the teacher who takes them to the classroom (see Picture 2).

Source: The picture was made by the autor

Picture 2: Leaving the classroom and lining up behind the teacher

In the special classroom there is no seating order and students sit in their desks according to their sympathies and antipathies towards their classmates—see Picture 3.

Source: The picture was made by the autor

Picture 3: Special classroom

At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher invites the students to gather in front of her desk to explain what they will be doing today. The students then approach their own tables and stand before them again according to their sympathies and antipathies.

Teacher: What are we going to do today? Today we are going to do group work. We are going to study Egyptian writing and draw Egyptian gods according to the model.

Teacher: First, we'll divide into teams. How are we going to do this? Tell me how many of you there are today.

Students: 15.

Teacher: Okay, we'll choose five captains.

The teacher writes the letter C on five small pieces of paper and mixes them together with blank pieces of paper in a box and rattles them around. She an-

nounces to the children, "In the box, there are blank pieces of paper and five bits of paper each with the letter C on them. The students who select these pieces of paper will be the captains. The rest will then divide up into teams. One group will have a maximum of three members."

One boy from Group 3, one Roma girl, and three non-Roma girls become captains. They draw a small paper with the letter C.

Teacher: captains, please go to the back of the room. The rest of you come to me. I will assign numbers (the teacher gives out numbers from one to ten to the children).

The captains drew numbers to choose the members of their teams. The students were divided as follows:

Blue team: 2 non-Roma girls and 1 non-Roma boy

Green team: 2 non-Roma girls and 1 non-Roma boy

Pink team: 3 Roma girls

Purple team: 1 non-Roma girl, 1 Roma girl and 1 non-Roma boy

Yellow team: 1 non-Roma boy and 2 Roma boys

The problem arose with the students from Group 4. Emanuel and Zdeněk from Group 4 formed a team with a non-Roma boy from Group 3. Only this non-Roma boy worked on the given task. Emanuel and Zdeněk sat with him but did not participate in the task.

Further, complications arose with Bedřich right at the time the teams were chosen.

The team captain – a non-Roma girl – hesitated as to which number to choose. In the end, she chose number six, Bedřich's number.

Bedřich: Are you kidding me?

Teacher: Bedřich!

Bedřich: I don't want to go there. I won't work with her. She's always bugging me.

Bedřich moves slowly towards her, but after two minutes he goes to the teacher and asks her to put him in a group with his friends. The teacher denies his request.

Teacher: The teams were chosen randomly.

Bedřich: I'm not being on that team.

Teacher: You can work alone if you don't like it.

Bedřich doesn't answer. He is the only one at the front of the classroom, with the rest of the class at the back of the classroom (away from the teacher's desk).

Teacher: Are you going to work alone or will you join your team? In life we don't just work with the people we want to, with people we like.

After a while, the teacher turns to Bedřich: How can I help you? How would you like to complete this activity today? What would help you to be able to work with them?

Bedřich: Nothing would help me.

In the end, Bedřich decides to work alone.

The teacher gives him an assignment, but he doesn't work on it at all (observation records from the *field diary, the* i school in the town of Kruštíkov, *3. 12. 2018*).

This and other similar episodes demonstrates the stratification of relationships according who is friends with whom and who is willing to cooperate and communicate with whom. The blue team, the green team and the pink team worked very well and completed the exercise with excellent results. The purple team worked relatively well together and completed the exercise. The non-Roma boy from the yellow team worked alone completing his team's task. The other students did not participate in the activity and spent the whole lesson talking to each other. Similarly, Bedřich did not work at all. He sat alone in his desk the whole time. The Roma boys tried twice to approach Bedřich, but the teacher always returned them to their seats.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY: HOW THE STUDENTS FILLED IN THE QUESTIONNAIRES

The students came to the computer center to fill in the survey and sat according to their group membership (see picture 4). Bedřich from Group 4 was angry and the teacher moved him next to the non-Roma girls as a punishment. The boy refused to sit next to them and at first remained standing for several minutes. At the end of the lesson the teacher scolded Bedřich for his behavior. After the bell rang for break and after the teacher had left for the office, Emanuel stepped up to Bedřich and advised him, "Tell your mother what happened, she will beat her."

Picture 4: Filling in the surveys in the computer center

This class was interesting for me not only from an empirical point of view, but also from a methodological point of view. I had the unique opportunity to observe how students interacted with each other in this space and how they completed a questionnaire survey related to the school evaluation that mapped their relationship with their classmates, teacher and school (the results of this survey are available in the figure below).

Teacher: Read the questionnaire carefully. Everyone fills it out for themselves and according to themselves, because everyone has a different view of it. Now be quiet, work and don't disturb others.

Teacher: The questionnaire is several pages long, so click on the continue button at the bottom on your computer when you have completed the page.

One of the students completed the questionnaire after only a few minutes. The teacher walked up to him and asked, "What? Did you get it?"

Student: Yes, I have.

The classmate sitting next to him: He clicked it by chance.

Teacher: Is that true?

Student: Yeah.

Teacher is shaking her head and saying: Then go sit on that chair over there. She points to the empty desks next to the non-Roma girls (observation records from the *field diary, the* lower secondary school in the town of Kruštíkov, *22. 11. 2018*).

There is a lot of information in the questionnaire and over time some of the students got tired of completing it. There were statements from students like "I don't want to read it" and a few students started answering the questions quickly without reading them properly. Students who finished early were able to chat with each other and wait for other classmates to finish the questionnaire. So as soon as one of the students from the third group finished, the other two boys sped up their completion. They wanted to finish too in order to talk about football, basketball and computer games.

Other problems also emerged. Some children did not understand some of the questions at all and had to call the teacher to explain them. The questionnaire also asked the students to choose their gender. Some boys, as a joke, chose *female* instead of *male*. I also consider it a major complication that the students did not have a quiet place to fill it in. Many of their fellow students were disturbing them, which interfered with their ability to understand the questions properly. The students also did not have the opportunity to think carefully about the answer to each question.

In addition, students lacked privacy in the computer lab. Students often looked towards neighbors, watching them filling in their answers. As a result, many children did not answer the more sensitive questions. Some were afraid to fill in these answers, not wanting their classmates to know their opinion, which could have led to further conflict. Another huge disadvantage became apparent while filling in the questionnaires. Only the teacher was there for the questionnaire completion, not the questionnaire author.
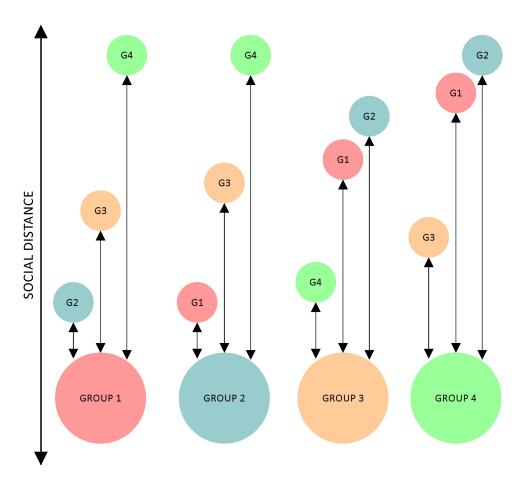
DISCUSSION

Jenkins (2014: 12) asks provocative questions that are somewhat relevant to my research and children's groups at school. "Groups may be imagined, but this does not mean that they are imaginary. They are experientially real in everyday life. In this respect, the empirical questions we should ask are: Why do people believe in groups? Why do they believe that they themselves belong to them? And why do they believe that others belong to them?"

Although more complete answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this text, I will attempt to address them in the context of the sixth grade and the Czech school. Students believe in and identify with groups because it gives them a sense of belonging, safety, support, and acceptance. Group membership fulfills their social needs and also helps them to navigate the social space of the classroom and school. In the sixth grade, there is a significant separation of the collective into "us" and "them."

Every student wants to belong to some group, as remaining alone would be make the student vulnerable.

Each group has its own structure and identity in the sixth grade. Each reflects socio-economic differences, differences in school achievement, goals, ideas about life and education, differences in family background, differences in schooling, school attendance, and career aspirations. These factors make group affiliations so strong that the school is unable to break or blur group lines in the sixth grade and create a united collective that pulls everyone together.

I am aware that a number of theoretical and methodological problems arise when observing children's collectives, for example, in developing criteria by which to distinguish "close relationships" from "less close relationships" (Výrost 2019: 181). Nevertheless, through careful analysis of the information I have gathered, I have created a diagram/picture that illustrates the social distance between the four groups—see below.[15]

Source: The picture was made by the autor

Picture 5: Social distance among sixth grade groups

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[15] When I analyzed the collected data, I created a similar picture for each student.

For the sixth grade, the criterion described by sociologist Eliška Novotná (2010: 72-73) applies: "Those social groups that are similar, that are in the same situation, are not threatened. Such groups know their mutual expectations and do not surprise each other. They have similar value systems, share attitudes, norms, and beliefs and this leads to mutual sympathy and symmetrical relationships. Social groups feel safe not only with groups with whom they share needs but also with those groups whose needs are complementary to their own."

From this point of view, in the sixth grade, asymmetrical relationships can be observed and identified between the first and fourth groups (non-Roma girls vs. Roma boys and one non-Roma student), and the second and fourth groups (non-Roma boys vs. Roma boys and one non-Roma student). The remaining relationships are relatively symmetrical depending on the context and the development of the sixth grade.

During my research, I found out that almost half of the six grade students evaluate the school negatively. In terms of social relationships and school outcomes, it is important to observe how students feel at school. The results in the chart can be related to information from the Czech School Inspection (CSI 2019: 7), according to which up to 19% of Czech students agreed that they feel lonely at school. Furthermore, what has been confirmed by the international PISA survey is significant, namely that lonely students and outsiders tend to achieve worse school results (see CSI 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

The main contribution of this article is a description of the peer relations and group dynamics in the context of Roma education and inclusive education in the Czech Republic. Special attention is devoted to the grouping and social and interethnic communication among twelve-year-old students in a Czech school located near an excluded locality that is perceived as problematic by local residents. The article is based on ethnographic research in sixth grade, which is perceived as the worst class at school and which is attended by several Roma boys and girls. The article provides empirical data that can contribute to the discussion on what constitutes classroom interaction and how we can understand it (Delamont 2018, Watson and Moray House Institute of Education 2019, Manke 1997).

The research findings demonstrate how social and ethnic boundaries in the groups of children are constructed and negotiated in educational settings. There is an explanation of the benefits of being in the group and how students and groups communicate with each other. The findings indicate that the boundaries among the sixth grade groups are firmly fixed, with each group living to an extent in its own social bubble. In terms of methodology, the article also provides an interesting example of how students completed a survey that mapped their relationship with their classmates, teacher, and school.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Radek Vorlíček is a researcher in the Institute of Social Work at the University of Hradec Králové, Czech Republic. His specialization is Anthropology of Education. His research interests focus on Inclusive education, peer relations, and ethnicity. He has been doing ethnographic fieldwork for several years in educational settings in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. He has explored how inclusive education succeeds and fails in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Mr. Vorlíček has successfully completed a PhD at the Charles University in Prague with a specialization in General anthropology.