

# THE SEGREGATIVE ASPECTS OF “PRO-ROMA” POLICIES\*)

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**Abstract:** In the article the author examines the issues connected with the use of community schools as a modern form of education. There are certain risks tied to the use of this otherwise well thought-out concept, and they need to be considered before this form of education is adopted.

**Keywords:** Roma integration in the education system, remedial, community and basic schools, Czech Republic

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In the current discourse, remedial schools and “community” schools<sup>1)</sup> lie at the opposite ends of the notional scale of Roma integration in the education system. But is this really the case? Remedial schools have formally ceased to exist, and similarly in formal terms a “community school” is actually a label, and in reality both are formally basic schools. The question addressed in this text is whether these two types of schools really are polar opposites, or whether in categorical terms they actually overlap: in formal terms they are basic schools, but informally both are remedial schools.

The concept of the community school is today viewed by many experts and the public as the best possible strategy for the integration of Roma into society. However, are there not in fact exceedingly high risks attached to the indirect effects of this concept? Are we not poised on the threshold of segregated education?

## The facts and myths of special education

Under the new Education Act<sup>2)</sup>, as of 1 January 2005, schools educating students with mental disabilities fall under the category of basic schools. Practical basic schools with a special-education programme of a remedial school, and an auxiliary school became the successors to the previous remedial school. In many cases there have been delays in applying this legislative change in practice. Where it has already been implemented, the question is whether it represents just a formal change, or whether it in fact signifies a complex shift in the approach to education, which will significantly improve the chances of students at these schools to successfully make the transition to a secondary school. The legislative change is certainly a positive one, though it will be many years before it is executed in full. But what was the branch of special education like before 1 January 2005?

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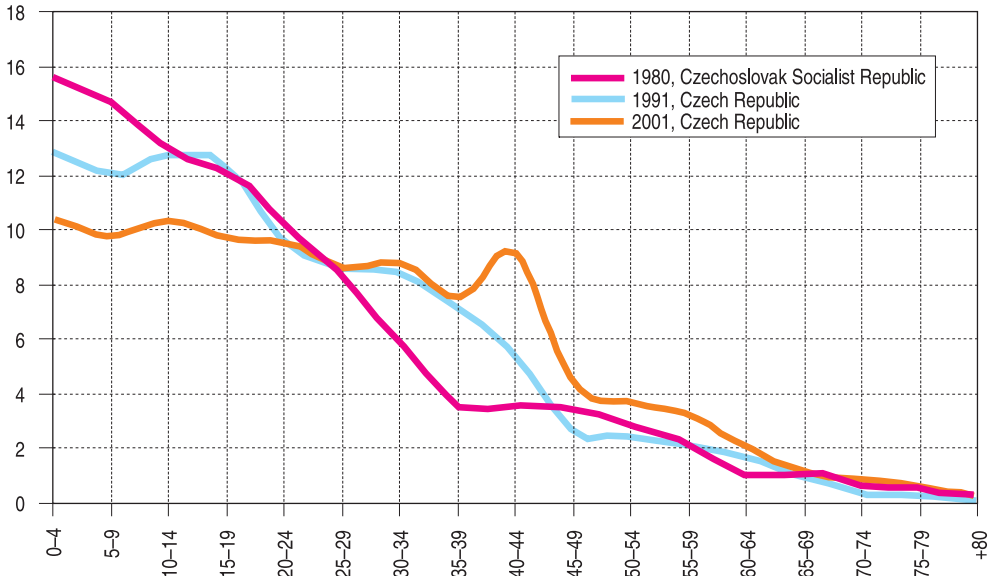
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<sup>1)</sup> A “community” school is an institution that offers extracurricular activities alongside the traditional educational curriculum. These activities are open not just to students but also to former students, students’ parents, and other members of the community.

<sup>2)</sup> This Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll. on Pre-school, Basic, Secondary, Higher Technical and Other Education) came into effect on 1 January 2005, with the exception of section 20, pars. 3, 5 and 7, which come into effect on the date of declaration, and with the exception of sections 77 through 79, and section 80, pars. 3 through 10, section 81, pars 1 through 8, and section 82, par. 3, which came into effect on 1 September 2007.

Figure 1 Age structure of the Roma population by Censuses over time



Source: Kalibová, 1991.

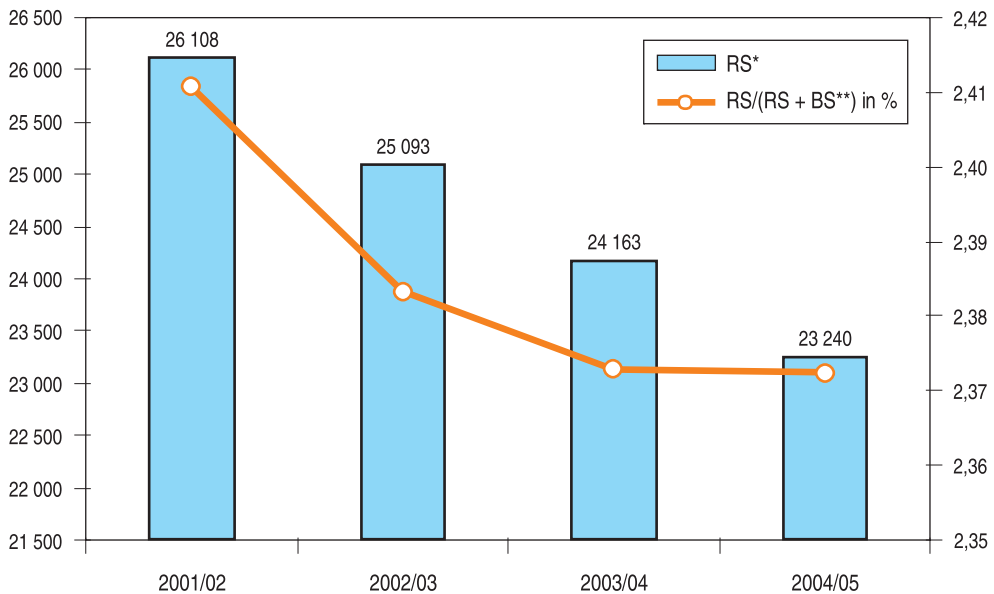
Many newspaper articles and the statements of activists in the past put forth estimates of how many Roma students attend special-education schools and what percentage of all Roma children of compulsory school age attend such schools. An interesting consensus emerged at one point around the estimate claiming that approximately 75% of all Roma children attend a remedial school. For instance: “The situation throughout the republic was even worse, three-quarters of Roma children were attending a special-education school” (Bártová, 2006); and “At present as much as 75% of Roma children have been reassigned or directly placed in a special-education school. The reason for this usually is not just their Roma nationality. It is also owing to their language handicap, the different dynamics of their development, and the different hierarchy of values – Veselý specified.” (Frydecká, 2006) And there are numerous similar such examples. But what data are these estimates based on? The paradox is that most people who cite such figures simultaneously declare that there are currently around 300 000–350 000 Roma living in the Czech Republic.

Estimating the real number of Roma living in the Czech Republic is not an easy task. There is no one “correct” solution to this question, mainly thanks to the continuous migration flows of Roma from Slovakia. Instead we have to make do with wide estimate intervals. While it is difficult to make an estimate in absolute figures, data from the population censuses in 1970, 1980, 1991, and 2001 allow us to work with the population’s age structure. Although in 1991 and 2001 only a negligible number of Roma declared themselves to be of Roma nationality (32 903 and 11 746, respectively), the distribution by region and age structure surprisingly coincides with data from the census in 1980 and especially with data from the lists of migrants/inhabitants maintained by the national committee (the last available one of which dates from 1989), or more precisely, the age structure approximately corresponds to possible development. This fact allows us to work with the age structure and estimate, for example, what percentage of the population is made up of children of compulsory school age. Naturally these are just rough estimates, but given that the total number is a rough estimate it is acceptable to use such an approach.

In order to estimate the percentage of Roma who attend or before 2005 attended a remedial school, we need to know how many Roma students actually attended a remedial school in a given school year and how many Roma are in a given age group (between the ages of about 6 and 15). Since there are no statistics available on students at remedial schools by ethnic group, we will assume that the absolute majority of students at these schools are Roma. For the sake of simplicity we will assume that **all** the students attending a remedial school who were assigned to this specific type of school for reasons of mental disability (the reason given in 90% of cases), and or learning disabilities, and behavioural problems are Roma. From a more detailed analysis of the age structure of the Roma sub-population we can obtain the percentage of people in this sub-population that are of compulsory school age (6–15 years), which is around 22%. Figure 2 presents the number of students attending a remedial school in each given year: in the 2003–2004 year, 24 164 children attended this type of school.

We will calculate the estimated percentage of Roma attending remedial schools based on an estimate of the total number of Roma living in the Czech Republic calculated by *Květa Kalibová*, who has long been working on this issue. According to her estimate, in 2005 approximately 250 000 Roma were living in the Czech Republic; 22% of this figure is equal to approximately 55 000 people. Therefore, in the 2003–2004 academic year around 55 000 Roma in the Czech Republic were attending a basic or a remedial school. Also in that year approximately 24 164 children were attending a remedial school, which is equal to around 44%. Were we to use the estimates of Roma activists that around 350 000 Roma live in the Czech Republic, the percentage of Roma children attending a remedial school out of the total number of Roma children of compulsory school age would “only” be 30%. And yet it is these activists, and some journalists, who cite the estimates that around 75% of Roma children attend remedial schools.

Figure 2 Total numbers of students in special education schools and percentage of these students out of total students (%)



Source: Schools and school families for the 2004-2005 academic year – Code: 3301-05; 2–3 and 2004 – Code: 3301-04; 2002 and 2003 – Code: 3301-03; 2001 and 2002 – Code: 3301-02.

Note: \*Remedial school, \*\*Basic school.

It is obvious that various myths have emerged around remedial schools, and one of them is the overestimated number of children directly affected by the problem of attending such schools. In this case the overestimate is probably twice as high. And yet, even if "only" 40% of Roma children are affected by this problem, it is still an issue that urgently needs to be addressed.

### **Enrolment trends among schools in a given locality**

Remedial, basic, community, and selective schools: each of these is a formal or informal type of school attended by children of compulsory school age. Each school has a catchment area, the size of which varies depending on the size of the community that the school is located in. In towns the borders between schools serve only as guidelines, and often several types of school are located within a single catchment area. Parents thus have a choice of where to enrol their children. Conversely, in smaller towns or in villages, the choice is limited, and unless parents want to send their child to another school many kilometres away they will send their child to the school located in their catchment area.

Below I will describe certain segregative processes in student enrolment trends that occur in larger settlements, usually large towns. Figure 1 illustrates the enrolment trends among four schools in a locality, where one school (a selective basic school) lies on the border between several localities. This school provides high-quality education: the teachers put high demands on the students, and most of the students from this school go on to attend a multi-year gymnasium. Often parents send their children to this school from communities located some distance away, and there are no Roma children enrolled in this school.

Another school in the locality is a basic school, which for working purposes I refer to as a standard school. It is located directly at the centre of the locality. Its students usually go on to attend a multi-year gymnasium, a regular gymnasium, or a technical school, and some students go on to study at a vocational school. The school provides relatively good-quality education, and it has a good reputation among students' parents. Roughly 10% of the student body is Roma, which by my estimates is slightly lower than the percentage of Roma in the given locality. One problem the school has to deal with is the outflow of Roma students to another basic school, which I will refer to here as a "community basic school".

In recent years this community basic school has been developing dramatically. While in 2001 around 57% of all students were Roma, in 2003 the figure was just over 70%, and by 2005 it had already reached more than 80%. This development was significantly influenced by the active "pro-Roma" policy of the school, which made it popular among the local Roma community, and by its various "Roma-friendly" activities, such as regular fairs and various student performances centred on Roma folklore, etc., motivating parents to enrol their students in this school instead of other schools. For more than a decade the school has also offered a preparatory year for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

The last type of school in the Figure is the remedial school. Although this type of school formally no longer exists, I retained the term for several reasons:

1. At the time when the research which I draw on in this analysis was conducted this school was in formal and practical terms a remedial school.
2. Although the school was renamed, that is, its status changed, the school continues informally to fulfil the function of a remedial school in the locality.

Like the community basic school, this school also offers a preparatory year, but for a shorter period.

### **Process A – transfers of Roma students between the remedial school and the community school**

The positive function served by the community school is that the lower demands placed on students enable even some students attending a remedial school to succeed, especially in the earlier years of schooling, when differences between the knowledge levels of students are not

yet too substantial. In the vast majority of cases the transfers in both directions between these two types of school involve Roma students. Despite the relatively low demands placed on students in the community school, some students are still reassigned to the remedial school. This transfer usually occurs at the request of the parents and usually in upper school years, and girls tend to be transferred earlier as they mature more quickly.

Transfers out of the remedial school most often occur in the lower school years and in terms of volume involve a smaller number of students. Conversely, transfers out of the community school and into the remedial school occur in the upper school years and involve a larger number of students. As the demands placed on students in the community school are lowered, the number of students reassigned to the remedial school decreases.

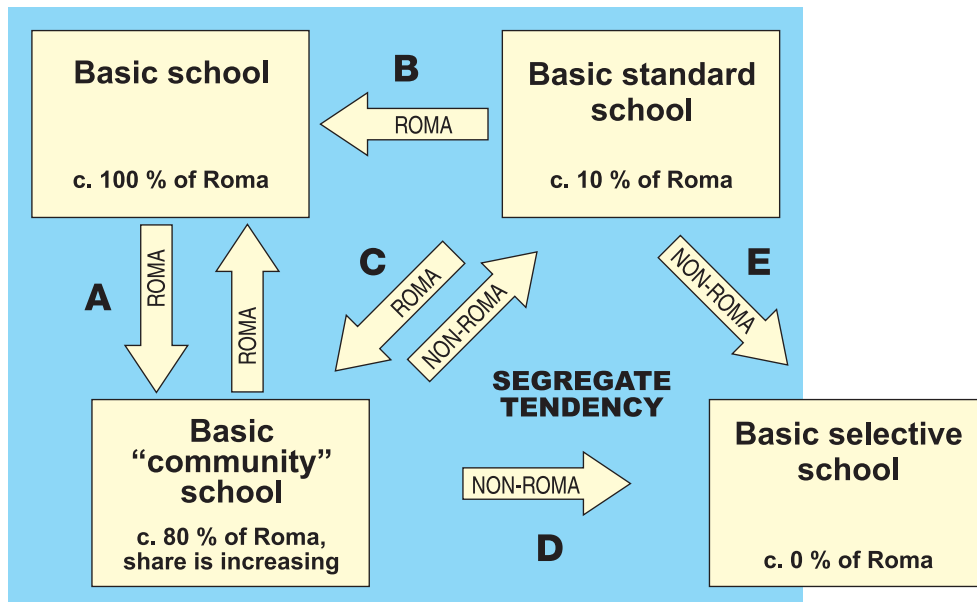
### Process B – reassignment from basic school to remedial school

This is the classic centrifugal tendency of basic schools to shed students who cannot keep up with the pace of learning in the class, while it is beyond the capacity of the teaching staff to focus on these students as much as they would need. Like Process A, the reassignment process tends to occur in the upper years. The already low percentage of Roma students at the school decreases. The advantage is that those Roma students who remain at the school have a relatively strong chance of succeeding at the next educational stage.

### Process C – non-Roma students exchanged for Roma students: the first principle of segregation

This process is the first and the most significant principle of segregation in effect among catchment schools. Owing to the lower demands placed on students in the community school

Diagram. Relations between schools in a catchment area



Note: Specific data on the percentage of Roma in individual schools are based on the real situation in one Prague locality, where research was conducted as part of an evaluation of the effectiveness of preparatory years for the Czech Ministry of Education (Hůle et al., 2004).

there tends to be an outflow of non-Roma students from the school, even if these students then have to commute to schools farther away. This process affects almost all non-Roma students, regardless of social differentiation or even differences in cognitive skills.

Another, smaller, but nonetheless very dangerous, trend is the outflow of Roma students from the basic school and into the community school. Most of these students would likely be capable of successfully completing the course of study in their original school, but the community school has a very strong appeal and draws in Roma students. This transfer usually occurs at the request of the parents themselves, even though sometimes teachers from the source (i.e. basic standard) school even attempt to dissuade them from taking this step. This process, marked as Process C in Figure 1, consequently results in an increase in the percentage of Roma students attending the community school.

### **Process D – the outflow of non-Roma elites: the second principle of segregation**

The outflow of non-Roma students from the community school and into the selective school is a dangerous trend, because this means that smart students with good prospects for continuing education leave the school in the lower school years. As a result, there are no hard-working students left in the classroom, and there is a consequent drop in the knowledge level of students in the class. A certain number of students would probably transfer to a selective school soon or later anyway, but perhaps not until they were in an upper year. Parents of non-Roma students opt to transfer their children to another school owing to the increased percentage of Roma students in the student body.

### **Process E – the concentration of elites: the third principle of segregation**

Students in the community school are only marginally affected by this process. It has a greater impact on students in the basic school, which in Figure 1 is marked as the “standard” school. This is a natural process, whereby parents try to place their child in the school that provides the best education and will best prepare children for their educational path. This process almost exclusively involves non-Roma students, and the way it affects Roma students is that when the more gifted students leave the community school the pace of learning in the class declines. Process E, like Process D, leads to a concentration of more gifted and brighter students in a selective basic school and later at a multi-year gymnasium; the antithesis of this is the process affecting the community school, which balances on the informal edge between a basic and a remedial school.

### **Segregation in community schools**

Figure 1 depicts the enrolment processes that occur between individual types of schools in a locality. These processes occur in large towns, where parents have a choice of schools to which to send their children. Exact data on the percentage of Roma in these schools are drawn from repeat surveys conducted in one Prague locality, but the tendencies described here are similar to those in other localities in Prague, Brno, and elsewhere. The objective of describing the enrolment processes in a given locality is not actually to assess them, but sooner or later we will be forced to ask what sense the community school has in this constellation of processes.

Unquestionably a positive feature of this concept is the trend in which community schools attract a certain number of students from (today only informally) remedial schools. The trust placed in these schools by parents from the local Roma community is significant. The parents are more motivated to keep their children in a this kind of basic school and not request that they be transferred to a remedial school. In some cases they even request that their children be transferred out of a special-education school and into a basic school. There is however another side to the growing popularity of the school among Roma, and that is the lowered de-

mands placed on students and the decline in the popularity of the school among non-Roma students and their parents. This phenomenon is depicted in Figure 1 by Processes C, D and E.

Community schools typically involve the wider community in the life of the school. For example, they organise fairs for students' parents and the wider community, organise extracurricular activities for students and other young people, and include elements in the curricula that accommodate the particular community. In this case it means that students who are not accustomed to the quick pace of learning at the school have a chance to excel in skills that they know from their family background. In the majority society the Roma have a reputation as good musicians, dancers, and as being skilled at trades, and so as part of its curriculum the community school organises dance groups, adds more musical education, and so on. Consequently, Roma students "learn" skills that they are usually able to do well and at which they can excel at various performances. However, this is at the expense of other skills, which conversely they lack and cannot learn at home from anyone.

The increasing percentage of Roma students at community schools in the long term leads to segregated schools. The only students who remain at this kind of school are Roma and students from socially disadvantaged families who do not have the means to send their children to better schools farther away or are simply incapable of making such a decision. Can the fact that Roma parents take a liking to a community school and send their children there really make up for the segregation that the entire process is heading towards? Do we really want Roma children only to know *gádže* (non-Roma) from the street?

The community school conceived thus is an example of a policy with good intentions, but are the effects also good? At the start of this article I tried to debunk the myth that the majority of Roma attend special education schools. Certain segregative elements prevail or prevailed at remedial schools, but the majority of Roma attended basic school. If we choose to continue to support the concept of the community school, we will be putting the future of a large portion of Roma students at stake. We will be throwing them into mono-ethnic institutions that, alongside education, are intended largely also to fulfil a socialising function. However, in this case there is a risk of segregative socialisation, which ultimately encourages xenophobia.

### **Formal versus real basic school**

The segregated school that the community school ultimately turns into then in reality becomes a remedial school: formally it remains a basic school, but, like the real remedial schools that formally used to exist, the level of education in the sense of the demands that teachers place on their students is such that informally the community school devolves into a remedial school. Given the unified school typology in which these schools are now just variously named basic schools, this kind of community school will not stand out in any way. It will be difficult to examine the results of its students, and assessing the success of this concept will be complicated. It is quite possible that we will reach a situation like that in the United States, where in basic school many African American students only have other African Americans as fellow students, or in France, where although many migrants from North Africa attain higher education it is usually at a school that is stigmatised as a school for socially excluded students and most employers are not interested in the school's graduates.

### **Conclusion**

The organisation People in Need has attempted repeatedly to get particularly talented students transferred from a community school to a standard basic school. However, after up to a month of trying these efforts invariably failed and the most common argument on the part of parents and children was that the children have to study too much at the standard school. The



higher demands placed on children also put a bigger burden on the parents, and thus both parents and children are motivated to maintain the status quo. If I were to seek an analogy to this situation in the economic sphere, then it would describe it as unfair competition, where one school competes with another on the basis of the lower demands put on students or the smaller proportion of standard subjects in the school's curriculum. The gravitational pull of community schools is so strong that the school it does not release students to attend other schools while it simultaneously draws students away from standard basic schools and appeals to them with secondary activities, which are not the kind of activities that make a school a school.

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