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## SLOVAK ROMA VILLAGE OF ORIGIN AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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### Abstract

The immigration of relatively large numbers of Slovak Roma people to Sheffield since 2004 has highlighted some tensions around the settling of the new arrivals into the complex social, linguistic and cultural spaces of this diverse city. Schools have faced particular challenges welcoming the new children who manifest various issues in relation to their language competencies, prior educational experiences, truncated schooling and often lived experiences of social deprivation and marginalization. Based on data from an ongoing ethnographic study and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (2005) 'Process-Person-Context-Time' (PPCT) framework, this paper presents the context of the two main sender villages of the Roma in Sheffield and forefronts some of the experiences of Slovak Roma children in secondary school as they negotiate prevailing English-only language ideologies and complex curriculum challenges. Findings show that, whilst the Roma pupils are making some headway in terms of school integration, they are often finding academic attainment a step too far, particularly in terms of formal educational outcomes. Furthermore, an analysis of educational attainment data by village of origin raises questions of contextual impacts on educational achievement.

### Keywords

Education, Slovak Roma, Attainment, Bystrany, Žehra, Bronfenbrenner, Sheffield

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the Slovak Roma community living in Sheffield, a community that has grown in size since Slovakia gained access to the EU in May 2004 (EU, 2007) and now represents some 6000 of the ca. 500,000 population of the city. Roma migration to Sheffield is fuelled by a combination of 'push' factors in Slovakia, e.g. lack of employment opportunities and discrimination (Mušinka & Kolesárová, 2012; Scheffel, 2013), and 'pull' factors in the UK, such as increased employment prospects and perceived better schooling (Brown, Martin, & Scullion, 2014); some 50% of the Roma are here for employment in a 'non-discriminatory labour market', though they often have to take self-employed or short-term work (European Dialogue, 2009; Runnymede Trust, 2012). The move from such settlements in Slovakia to other countries in the EU could be termed a natural move from 'periphery' to 'centre' in globalisation discourse (Blommaert, 2010). It should be noted, however,

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that a Sheffield-Bystrany link existed prior to 2004, with some families from the East of Slovakia having been relocated to the industrial areas of what was then Czechoslovakia, subsequently seeking asylum from there to 'the West' and arriving in the UK thereafter (MP Fieldnotes; see also: Znamenáčková, 2008).

Despite continued inwards and outwards migration there is now a sizeable settled community intent on making Sheffield home. Quite naturally, the Roma children attend local schools, with one local primary school in Page Hall having over 90% Roma children on roll. As an academic working in a Department of Education, I have been exploring how Roma children engage with the formal school processes and access the English secondary (high) school curriculum. This has meant investigating such aspects as 'school readiness', literacy skills and language issues, to include the use of Romani and Slovak and the efforts now to learn English, for many their third language.

Scrutinizing data in relation to school leaving examinations for the Roma 16-year olds, some patterns have emerged. On paper, some Roma pupils are achieving nothing, others are leaving with the most basic of qualifications at Entry Level and very few are achieving the normative Level Two qualifications for 16-year olds nationally. Whilst overall there is a tendency towards a lack of academic attainment across the Roma cohort, it is the comparisons in results in which the children from one of the key villages of origin are out-performing the children from another, that has provided the catalyst for this paper and prompted the following research questions: What levels of attainment do the Roma pupils achieve at the end of high school in Sheffield? What differences in attainment are there between the children from the two main sender villages? What could account for those differences in attainment?

The aim here is to attempt to shed light on possible factors accounting for the often-poor academic performance of the Roma pupils, with a more fine-grained focus on attainment *by village of origin*. However, it is also acknowledged that certain factors may militate against academic achievement of the Roma pupils, *regardless* of village of origin, for example, patchy school attendance, truncated school experiences, a general lack of literacy skills and a lack of English may all play a role in academic underachievement, coupled with school structures that broadly favour academically-inclined children. And in terms of evaluating in a quantitative fashion just what it is that sees children from Bystrany outperform those from Žehra, that is a virtually impossible task that needs to consider the Roma both as a diverse community and as individuals, with each individual being a unique blend of genotype and phenotype (a mix of nature and nurture if you will) so that any conclusions drawn here are tentative at best (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Jaeger, 2016).

In Section 2 of this paper, I will outline the research project to include the methods and participants. In Section 3, the theoretical framework is explicated



before the exemplar case study school is described in Section 4. In Section 5, I will turn attention to Eastern Slovakia and the two villages that send the majority of Roma to Sheffield – Bystrany and Žehra. In Section 6, I consider the levels of English of the Roma pupils. Section 7 presents the main findings in relation to school achievement and then conclusions are drawn in Section 8.

## **Section 2: THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND PARTICIPANTS**

This ethnographic study commenced in January 2013 to explore the Slovak Roma community in Sheffield and track the Roma children through five years of high school education. In accordance with ethnographic approaches (Eriksen, 2004), the data collected have been both qualitative and quantitative and the tools for data collection are semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, fieldnotes, photographs, and secondary sources such as school policies, data sets and the corpus of research literature on the Roma. Fieldwork has been carried out in high schools in Sheffield and the source localities in Slovakia. The key participants in this project are the head teachers and teachers of the schools in Slovakia and Sheffield from where data has been collected, and those Slovak Roma pupils (and their families) from Bystrany and Žehra attending three high schools in Sheffield; qualitative and quantitative data are aggregated to protect the identity of the pupils and schools.

## **Section 3: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Uri Bronfenbrenner's 'Process-Person-Context-Time' (PPCT) framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, 2009) supports this study in considering the developing [Roma] child within the closer family, wider community and beyond. The 'engines of development' in the growth of the child are the 'proximal processes', 'regular ongoing, complex reciprocal interactions between the developing person and the people, objects and symbols present within a given microsystem' (Jaeger, 2016, p. 168).

In terms of reciprocity, the individual character of the developing child is vital; Bronfenbrenner classifies this according to 'demand', 'resource' and 'force' characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Demand characteristics are age, ethnicity, gender and behaviour traits that invite or discourage positive or negative reactions that are key in influencing proximal processes. Resource characteristics may not be so readily apparent and include a low birth weight, past severe illness, abilities and knowledge, and force characteristics are combinations of cognitive, emotional, social and motivational factors linked to temperament and personality that may facilitate or militate against proximal interactions. The developing individual then, can have agency in the proximal process of development, and from an early age during close interactions e.g. 'feeding or comforting a baby, playing with a young child' (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996). The developing baby/child will provoke reactions based upon his/her



individual characteristics thus influencing reciprocal reactions in the immediate developmental context.

The PPCT framework distinguishes five systems: the microsystem, the meso-system, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The microsystem is the site of 'pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person' with examples including the home, school and peer group (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 147), with the 'stable' family being the key desirable microsystem in terms of being relatively predictable and thus conducive to development, rather than an unstable and chaotic family life which has the opposite effect (Jaeger, 2016, p. 165). The mesosystem is the relationships and links between the microsystems, such as between the child's home and school and the child's peer group and family. The exosystem introduces the wider community and, according to Bronfenbrenner, 'at least one setting that does not ordinarily contain the developing person' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148), such as the father's workplace which can have a positive effect on the child's development, such as through a pay rise, or negatively, such as from reduced hours or redundancy (and think of the Roma man who loses his job and suddenly moves the family on to another location). The macrosystem is the 'distal' layer, the wider social, cultural, political and economic environment that the child is born into and brought up in, manifested in the type and character of national government and the policies pursued in terms of the economy, health, education, and, in our case, explicit or implicit policies affecting the Roma – migration, benefits, housing etc.; as Bronfenbrenner puts it, 'the macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture or other broader social context' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 150). The final aspect of Bronfenbrenner's framework, the chronosystem, refers to the dimension of time in relation to the developing child and changes in the environment: the birth of a sibling, entering a school, going through puberty or severe illness, anything that alters the 'existing relationship between person and environment, thus creating a dynamic that may instigate change' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 119).

It has to be stated that, for the purposes of this project, Bronfenbrenner's work is helpful, though it may be virtually impossible to answer concretely the question of how someone's genetic make-up, coupled with environmental contexts, influences their cognitive stimulation and growth and eventual academic potential, never mind that potential being ultimately realised. As Scarr (1996) points out: '...both personal and instructional differences, or genetic and environmental differences are involved... the theoretical and methodological abilities to parse causation is the major challenge...' (Scarr, 1996, p. 10 my emphasis).



## Section 4: THE EXEMPLAR CASE STUDY SCHOOL

To provide an insight into high school education in Sheffield and a multilingual school working with the Roma in particular, I present Ridgeway School (pseudonym), one of the participating schools, as an exemplar case study.

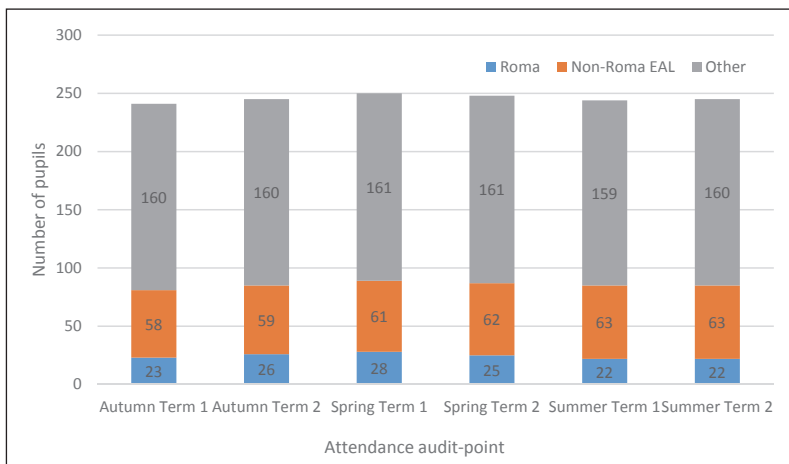
Ridgeway is a coeducational secondary school located in the north-east of Sheffield, South Yorkshire. In 2016/2017 the school had 1023 pupils in the age range 11-16, making it an average sized secondary academy (Department for Education, 2015). The proportion of disadvantaged students supported through the pupil premium<sup>1</sup> is 61.6%, over twice the national average, with 40.9% of the pupils eligible for free school meals<sup>2</sup>. According to school data, some 35.3% of the pupils do not have English as their first language and the proportion of students (16.5%) who have 'special education needs or a disability' is above average. Many of the pupils in school are 'White British' (49%), then Pakistani heritage (11%), Roma and other Eastern European (10%) and about 25% 'Other', with many of the 'other' pupils being of various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

In the residential areas close to the school, 1,500 Slovak Roma live in Page Hall and there were 1843 Roma pupils attending Sheffield schools in April 2014, of which 891 lived in the Page Hall region (Sheffield City Council, 2014). As a result, Ridgeway has about 100 Slovak Roma pupils at any given time, with a few from Czechia. They come from the two main source localities of Bystrany and Žehra (examined below), as well as other villages in Eastern Slovakia, e.g. Harakovce, Jablonov, Rudňany, Poráč and Spišský Štvrtok.

The total Roma population at Ridgeway fluctuates throughout the year as parents and their children return to Slovakia or travel elsewhere in the UK for shorter or longer periods – sometimes to return to Ridgeway or to be replaced by new arrivals. Figure 1 highlights this trend for Year 7 (the first year of high school) 2015-16, with the original Roma entry of 23 rising and then falling to 22 pupils over the course of the year as marked by six data capture points. It is interesting to note the changes as well in the non-Roma EAL cohort (inward/outward movement is not an essentially Roma practice) and the relative stability of the 'other pupils' cohort.

The words of one Ridgeway teacher illustrate this churn of pupils: '...on the Monday after Christmas several new Slovak Roma arrived unannounced' (Teacher 1: 16/01/15). And this from the Headteacher at Bystrany Elementary School: 'Last week, eight pupils left for the UK and four returned' (Headteacher: 24/4/15). This fluidity can militate against attendance and is a barrier to effective planning of lessons and other activities when teachers are unsure as to who will be turning up at school.

- 1 Extra funding for disadvantaged pupils, e.g. Special Educational Needs (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>).
- 2 A free school lunch is provided for pupils whose parents/carers qualify, e.g. through being unemployed (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>).



**Figure 1**  
Change in Y7 pupil numbers over one year

Ridgeway offers the full National Curriculum range of subjects<sup>3</sup> to potentially all of its pupils. However, as the English language is a fundamental tool for accessing the curriculum, Roma and other migrant children are tested for English, literacy and reading skills and allocated support classes of English accordingly<sup>4</sup>. The tension between learning English as the dominant language of the host society, and learning the curriculum subjects such as maths, geography, history and so on, is not a new one (Conteh, 2012). What is clear is that if a child is mainly studying English, then he/she must forego a broad curriculum provision and thus will be making no progress in those subjects, relative to the rest of the peer group.

### Section 5: THE SENDER VILLAGES OF BYSTRANY AND ŽEHRA

To contextualise the sender villages first of all, most of the Slovak Roma in Slovakia tend to live towards the east and south-eastern part of the country, with populations residing in small communities and settlements clustered around towns and cities such as Košice and Prešov, and then occupying various locations tracing a broad

3 The compulsory national curriculum subjects are the 'core' and 'foundation' subjects. Core subjects are: English, maths, science. Foundation subjects are: computing, physical education, citizenship. Schools must also offer at least one subject from each of these areas: arts, design and technology, humanities, modern foreign languages. They must also provide religious education (RE) and sex education at key stage 4 (<https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/key-stage-3-and-4>).

4 These are structured according to New to English (NtE) classes: NtE1 (basic level), NtE2 (intermediate level) and NtE3 (advanced), where the English language is boosted and regular curriculum lessons slowly introduced as the levels of English improve.



crescent south and west towards the southern fringes of the region of Banská Bystrica and the border with Hungary (Škobla et al, 2014). That said, there are pockets of Roma residing in most regions of Slovakia; according to Klimovský et al:

*'...Roma communities that contain the minimum of 30 persons have been identified in 1,070 municipalities... ca. 54% live in concentrated Roma settlements: 233 of them are territorially segregated... 324 of them are located in the periphery of the municipal residential areas, and 246 of them are located within the municipal residential areas... almost half of the overall Roma population (around 46%) live dispersed among the majority population'* (Klimovský, Želinský, Matlovičová, & Mušinka, 2016, p. 30).

It must also be noted that each Roma community, whilst broadly falling within one of three categories of 1. integrated within the majority population, 2. marginalized but peripheral to the majority population, and 3. territorially segregated from the majority population, will in and of itself be different, i.e. not all territorially marginalised settlements are the same. And again, within one Roma community there will be a social and economic hierarchy characterized, for example, by families who are economically relatively well off, such as the family receiving remittances from abroad who are renovating their home, as opposed to the family where social ills prevail, poverty is endemic and income derives solely from the state (see e.g.: Mušinka & Kolesárová, 2012; Scheffel, 2013; Škobla et al, 2014).

Space does not permit a full ethnographic account of the villages of Bystrany and Žehra and more contextual details will emerge in the findings section, below, but to provide some context for the purposes of this paper, both villages lie in rural locations in Eastern Slovakia, just 5.83km apart by road, 3km in a direct line. The village of Bystrany comprises of some 3314 inhabitants, of whom about 2772 are Roma (Škobla et al, 2014). The village centres on the church and Mayor's office, with the village store nearby. The Roma settlement could be classified as 'marginalized but peripheral to the majority population' (Klimovský et al., 2016) but this is actually a village in demographic flux, shifting towards a Roma-majority population both within the Roma settlement (of course) and also within the 'majority population' village, as homes are purchased by the Roma with remittances from abroad.

The elementary school is an excellent educational facility well run by a dynamic, engaged and politically active Romani-speaking Head teacher with many years of experience; this school as a 'microsystem' does much to drive the positive development of the Roma children and their families. On multiple visits to the school I have been impressed with the quality of the teachers and teaching, the resources, the committed staff, the high expectations of behaviour, the links to the Pastor and outreach work in the settlement, and the robust curriculum conforming to Slovak norms. The Roma settlement is separate but in close proximity to the main village, and a 14-minute walk away from the main High school. Within the settlement



there are two grocery shops, three sets of traditional three-story apartment blocks facing 'Sheffield Square'<sup>5</sup>, and the rest of the settlement consists of closely-sited detached houses lining the road that loops through the settlement. There is much evidence of internal and external renovation: new build, in-fill (building houses between other houses where space allows), new bathrooms and kitchens (proudly shown to me), connections to the water supply, and expansion – the settlement is spreading southwards, and, according to residents, money earned in Sheffield and elsewhere is being reinvested in the homes in Bystrany and helping improve the shared spaces. The settlement would now be unrecognisable from observations made pre-2004 (Bader & Kunčíková, 2006; Znamenáčková, 2008).

Žehra represents a Roma settlement that has been pushed to the extreme spatial limits of the village boundary; it is 'territorially segregated'. From the heart of the main village of Žehra to the Roma settlement it is 1km, with the main (essentially) non-Roma village having a population of about 229 and the Roma settlement having approximately 1744 inhabitants (Škobla et al, 2014)<sup>6</sup>. The settlement occupies a flat site located between a narrow tributary of the river Hornád and the main 547 road to Spišské Podhradie and can be considered as having three parts. Firstly, there is the small primary school located at the southern end, across the road from the settlement; secondly, there is the main locus of housing consisting of 12 units of apartments, arranged in four rows of three, and four terraces of single-storey housing totalling some 42 homes. Within this part of the village are a small community centre, social worker's office and Catholic chapel located in one building, a newly built Apostolic Church and two village shops, one run by a non-Roma woman and the other a brand new shop (still being completed in April 2017) run by a Roma family. The third part of the village is situated back across the main road again, to the northern end of the settlement, and consists of self-built rudimentary homes constructed of logs or blocks strung sporadically along the roadside for about 500 metres. Some of these homes have basic sanitation, others do not: 'I was able to peer into a little wooden house, the owner and his family were there, it was very small indeed but pleasantly done out – a fridge but no electricity, beds, a tap protruding from the wall' (Fieldnotes, 1/4/16). This mix of housing consisting of apartments, houses and basic homes reflects a social and economic stratification in that, for the most part, the poorer families seem to occupy the most basic and isolated homes, the wealthier families occupying the houses or apartments.

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5 'Sheffield Namestie' features a stone amphitheatre with a decorative Roma symbol of a wheel, apparently all built by the Roma from proceeds of working in Sheffield.

6 By way of clarification, the Roma settlement is also referred to as Dobrá Vôľa ('good will') which is the name of the tiny settlement on the crossroads between the main village and Roma settlement. For the purposes of this paper, the Roma settlement will simply be referred to as 'Žehra'.



For example, there are signs that the single story homes are being improved and extended with remittances from abroad whereas there is little evidence of home improvement across the road in the most marginalized houses. The primary school is well equipped, run by a teacher and her assistant for children to age 6, including provision for Year '0', the 'catch-up' year for Roma children to ensure they are school-ready for elementary school (Slovak Ministry of Education, n.d.). Progression to elementary school means taking the trip by bus or on foot<sup>7</sup> to Spišské Vlachy.

To conclude this section, there is a qualitative difference between Bystrany and Žehra, with one village enjoying the benefits of remittances from abroad and close access to an excellent school and the other, more remote, seeing relatively little of the benefits of those working in Sheffield, with school access potentially problematic beyond six years of age. Reasons for the divergent educational outcomes of the Roma pupils in Sheffield may lie in these social, economic and educational contrasts.

### Section 6: THE ROMA PUPILS AND LEVELS OF ENGLISH

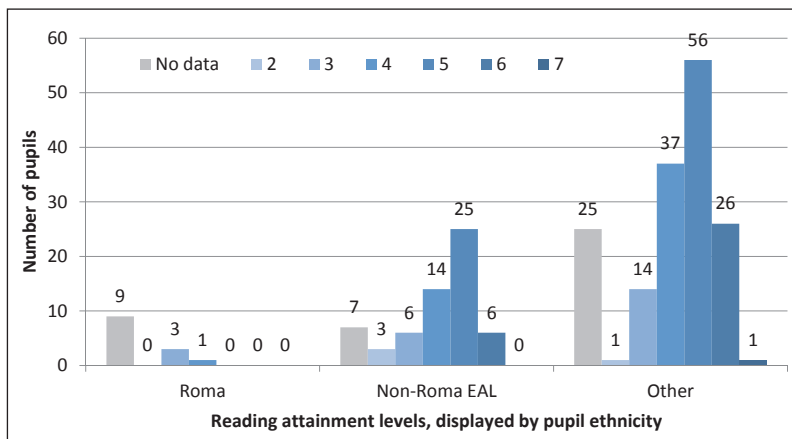
The Roma pupils obviously share the family experiences in terms of, for the most part, being born and raised in Slovakia and then migrating to Sheffield at a certain life stage. This means that each child has a unique experience of immediate family and community life in the Roma settlement ('osada'), village or town in Slovakia. Furthermore, each child has a unique educational trajectory in Slovakia/England in terms of attendance (or not) at a day care centre, a kindergarten or primary school (Materská Škola), a secondary school (Základná Škola) and beyond. In addition, each child has a unique combination of a variety of Romani, Slovak and English, including children born and brought up in the UK who hold Slovak passports but are often more conversant in English. However, literacy skills in *all* languages are usually woefully short of target, see for example Figure 2, below, which shows the National Curriculum (NC) level of English reading at Ridgeway School for a sample of the Roma, non-Roma EAL and English native speakers at age 12. It must be noted that an 11/12-year old child would be expected to have achieved a National Curriculum Level 4, and by the time they are 14 years of age they should have reached Level 6.

Only four Roma children of the 13 tested<sup>8</sup> have managed to score on the National Curriculum reading levels, thus evidencing a general lack of skill in English literacy. Three pupils attained a Level 3 meaning they can '...read a range of texts fluently... read independently... responding to fiction and non-fiction...show

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7 Walking from Žehra to Spišské Vlachy Elementary School involves a perilous journey of some 2.5km on foot, with no footpath (MP Fieldnotes: April, 2015).

8 According to Figure 1 there should be around 22 Roma pupils in Year 7 in the summer term, which leaves at least 9 unaccounted for in the graph in Figure 2.



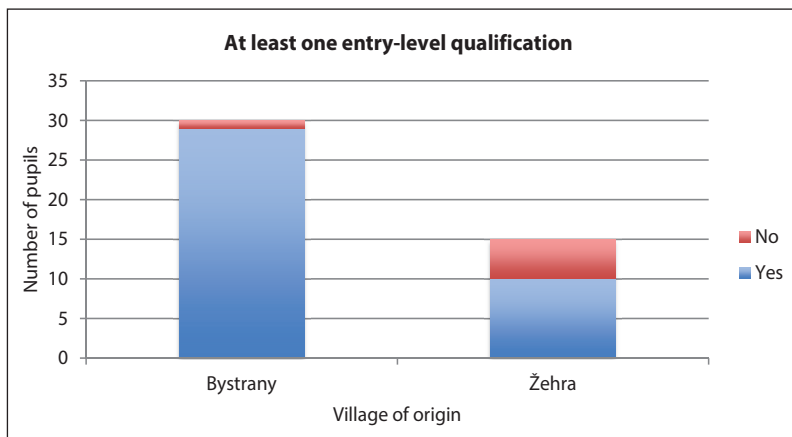
**Figure 2**  
Reading Assessments Y7 summer term

understanding... locate sources and find information...'; and one pupil reached a Level 4: '... shows understanding of significant ideas, themes, events and characters... beginning to use inference and deduction... texts reflect the time and culture in which they were written.' ('National Curriculum in England', 2013). Nine pupils are down simply as 'no data', i.e. unable to achieve a Level 1, and, to put this in perspective, Level 1 requires pupils to 'recognise familiar words in simple texts...use knowledge of sound-symbol relationships to read words and establish meaning... in response to poems, stories and non-fiction by identifying aspects they like... (ibid). It should be noted however that such assessments are designed for *native* speakers of English and, presumably, those that have not had their schooling interrupted, and are not intended for measuring levels below this – the Roma pupils *will* have made progress, including the nine for whom there is 'no data'. Both the non-Roma EAL and 'Other' cohorts seem to be making some headway with some pupils attaining as expected for this stage in their education. To conclude, language and literacy skills are crucial for formal schooling and through a combination of factors, the Roma children in this study are often lacking.

### Section 7: THE MAIN FINDINGS

In this section I present the attainment data that prompted this paper and address the three questions: 1. How well do the Roma children attain at the end of high school? 2. What differences in attainment are there between the children from the main sender localities? 3. What could account for the differences in attainment?

In terms of the attainment of the Roma children, data were compiled from the three participating Sheffield schools; the focus of the data is attainment at age



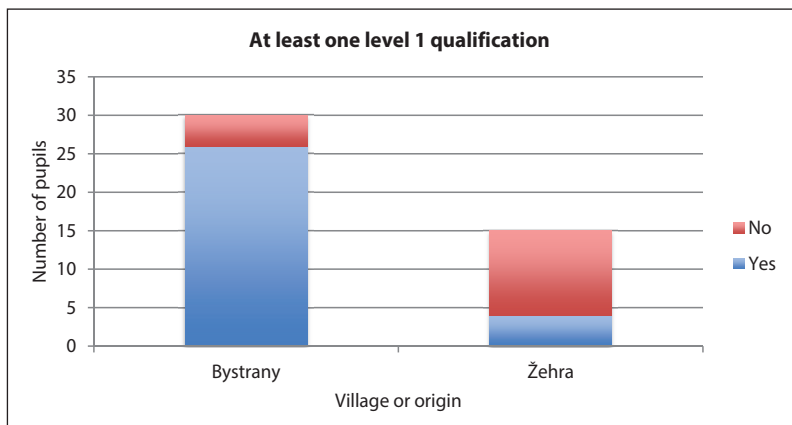
**Figure 3**  
Attainment at Entry Level

16. Figure 3 shows the number of pupils gaining a pass at Entry Level, sorted by the villages of Bystrany and Žehra. Entry level is the basic award for those working below grade G at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education, the 'standard' qualification at age 16)<sup>9</sup>.

The number of pupils entered from Bystrany is 30, with 15 entered from Žehra. In total, some 39 children from the two villages have managed to attain an Entry Level award and six in total were unsuccessful. What is evident is that more children from Bystrany (29) were successful than for Žehra (10) and only one child from Bystrany failed to gain the qualification, whereas it was five from Žehra, representing 30% of those entered from that village. A few points need to be made at this stage: what is not known is how many Roma pupils were *not* entered at all for this award. Furthermore, we do not have a subject-specific breakdown to allow us to see those subjects that the Roma were more or less successful at. What is clear is that whilst the pupils from Bystrany have held their own, some from Žehra have found this level a struggle.

Moving up from Entry Level, Level 1 qualifications provide 'basic knowledge and skills, the ability to apply learning with guidance... and may be linked to job competence' (nidirect, 2015). Pupils attaining Level 1 will be operating at GCSE grade D-G level; Figure 4, below, presents the attainment at Level 1.

<sup>9</sup> Entry Level focuses on 'basic knowledge and skills, the ability to apply learning in everyday situations' (nidirect, 2015). Pupils working at this level focus on assessed units of work that can be written, oral or practical and focus on 'non-traditional subjects' such as literacy, numeracy, life skills and practical and vocational subjects.

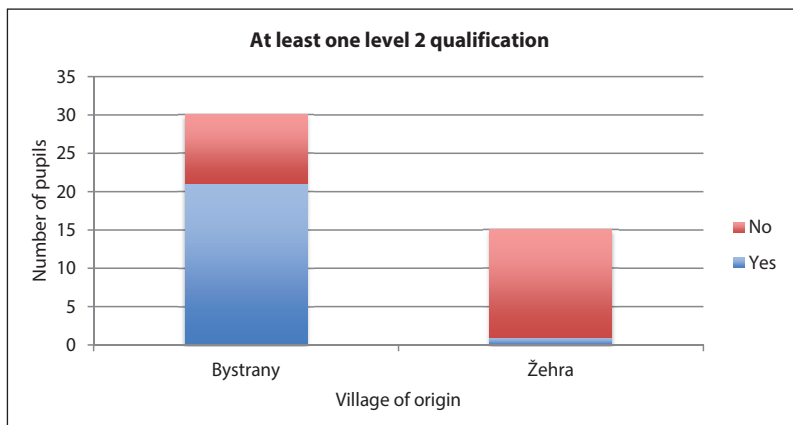


**Figure 4**  
Attainment at Level 1

We see that 30 pupils achieved at least one Level 1 qualification, 26 from Bystrany and four from Žehra. Of the pupils who did not achieve an award at this stage, 11 were from Žehra and four from Bystrany. The increase in academic challenge, albeit still a relatively low one, has highlighted the difference between the two village cohorts with Bystrany outperforming Žehra; in percentage terms 87% of Bystrany pupils attained the Level 1 award compared with 27% from Žehra. In terms of failure, 73% of Žehra pupils failed to achieve this award compared with a failure rate of 15% for Bystrany. Again non-entry data and subject specific breakdowns would have been useful.

The final graph represents attainment at Level Two, equivalent to GCSE, the *normative* school leaving qualifications at age 16. Achieving Level Two means pupils are working in the GCSE A\*-C range, providing 'good knowledge and understanding of a subject, the ability to do a variety of tasks with some guidance or supervision and are suitable for a variety of roles' (nidirect, 2015).

With the academic challenge increased further, only one pupil from Žehra has managed to achieve a Level Two qualification and 14 have failed to register a pass grade. For Bystrany, 30 pupils were entered and of these, 21 have passed at least one Level Two qualification, with nine failing to. Overall, out of 45 pupils entered for Level Two qualifications, 22 managed to pass at least one, and 23 failed to achieve at least one pass grade. The overall picture, representing the culmination of compulsory school-age education in England for these pupils, is not optimistic, but the Village split highlights stark differences in the capacities of the children from each village. Bystrany pupils entered for the Level Two examinations have managed in many ways to hold their own, with 21 out of 30 successful to some degree. The data for Žehra show that only one pupil managed to register at least



**Figure 5**  
Attainment at Level 2

one Level Two score, a sad return from 15 pupils entered. So what could account for these differences in attainment?

Reflecting back on Figure 2, it is clear that the Roma children are struggling with the learning of English as a foundation for their engagement with academic study, referred to as ‘Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)’ (Cummins, 2007), and some Roma pupils are learning English to the detriment of curriculum subjects which can only have a negative bearing on achievement in examinations later on. Many then, lack the linguistic foundation to make headway in learning and making progress in their subjects to attain the normative Level Two qualifications<sup>10</sup>. Once the pupils do reach the examination stage, all examinations are conducted in English, often necessitating a familiarity with abstract ‘examination language’, key being to understand what exactly is being asked before one can answer the question.

Reflecting on the differences between the attainment of the Bystrany and Žehra pupils, I return to Bronfenbrenner and contexts of development. We have seen that the relatively higher attainers come from Bystrany, a set of microsystems and a mesosystem that is, in many ways, an integrated Roma and non-Roma settlement, with the main settlement just on the edge of and yet well within walking distance of the village amenities, even if these are few. If proximal processes are the ‘engines of development’, then these are qualitatively evident in Bystrany, with the strong links between Roma parents and school, and also between the Roma community and the Roma mayor and mayor’s office, between the Pastor and Head

<sup>10</sup> NB: Pupils progress in schools in the UK chronologically, not by attainment reached. Therefore, pupils do not repeat school years if they have not attained as expected.



teacher, and the Pastor and Roma community, and various combinations thereof comprising a 'mesosystem'. The components of the mesosystem in Bystrany will be reinforcing behaviours that lead to the positive development of the Roma child.

Contrast this with Žehra and the remote, more marginalized lives of the Roma there – there is nothing of the bustling life of Bystrany<sup>11</sup>; there is not a prominent well-appointed Mayor's office centrally located and accessible, the village shop feels like visiting a small prison where goods are dispensed through railings and the Roma social worker, once part of a team of four (Roma and non-Roma) some three years ago, is now isolated in her work – work that would have been conducted in Slovak in the past, not just Romani. The elementary school is in an adjacent town and the necessity to travel to and from school there can militate against attendance. Whilst the microsystems of family, primary school, chapel, social centre and apostolic church are present, there are few of the tangible interactions between the individual microsystems in the mesosystem that could foster child development. It might not come as a surprise then, that the pupils from Bystrany outperform the pupils from Žehra, notwithstanding other factors. For example, how much impact has engaging with the English school system influenced the results given that all teaching and assessment has been conducted in English, probably the third language of many of the Roma children?

Whilst I would argue that the village contexts, the microsystems and mesosystems, must have had an effect on the school outcomes, I have only been able to research that which is visible and accessible to me. What Bronfenbrenner would argue is that whilst various aspects of the mesosystem and context of development of the child are important, it is what goes on in the home that is crucial – those early interactions between mother and baby, primary caregiver and immediate family and developing baby. Added to this, and fuelling development, is the stimulus provided in the form of toys etc. (Biro, Smederevac, & Tovilovič, 2009). Indeed, one of the major findings of Biro et al is that *poverty* alone is not a significant factor in the negative development of a child if the parents prioritize the care and development of that child. In other words, the pupils from Žehra could be theoretically performing as well as those from Bystrany. My belief is that the pupils from Žehra are underperforming not solely because of perhaps more impoverished surroundings in material terms, but an impoverishment of proximal processes and marginalized existence. However, the picture remains unclear, subject to further research to include more home visits in both villages to explore the proximal processes at work in the home and community. A starting point would be the homes of the children

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11 I have just returned from a field trip to Slovakia (1-13 April 2018) and at the time of writing there has been a sudden flurry of building activity within the settlement at Žehra. Three new blocks of apartments are under construction, with some of the workers drawn from the Roma community. This may herald a positive upturn in the fortunes of the people of Žehra.



who managed to attain the Level Two qualifications and compare them with the home lives of those who did not manage to attain academically.

In terms of the exosystem, 'a setting not ordinarily containing the developing person' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148), I was particularly struck with the visible evidence of home improvements in Bystrany, with many of the houses undergoing some form of renovation, others being built from scratch. It was obvious that the father's work (it is usually the father that works) in countries such as the UK, Germany and France, as evidenced by the car registrations observed in the settlement, is having a positive effect. And the positive uplifting effect of regular employment and family income is a key exosystem for Bronfenbrenner. The Roma families in Bystrany have been able to improve their homes and subsequently their living conditions and lives to some extent, which in turn will have a positive effect on the mood of the household, something that will communicate itself to the developing child. And what of Žehra? We know that many families from Žehra are also in the UK, indeed, they live in the same streets as the Bystrany Roma, and send remittances home. But the apartment blocks and low-rise houses in the main part of the village do not lend themselves readily to improvements, though some of the low-rises have been extended front and rear. However, the trend seems to be for the better off families to simply move out of the village and relocate elsewhere, such as to Spišské Vlachy. This represents something of a drain on social, economic and cultural capital as these more motivated families move out; the village loses some of its more aspirational inhabitants who could act as positive reinforcing models in the mesosystem. The developmental impacts upon both those that move out of the settlement and those that remain will require further research. I would hypothesise that the 'loss' of the more dynamic and socially and economically better-off families has a detrimental effect on the rest of the Žehra community.

The macrosystem for the Roma from both villages is similar in terms of the 'societal blueprint' and the wider social, cultural and political environment that the child is brought up in. Once the child leaves school in Slovakia and attempts to enter the world of work, he/she will have difficulty in making the transition to being an independent and productive member of society, reflecting the current 'societal blueprint', whether explicit or implicit, for the marginalized Slovak Roma in Slovakia (Mušínska & Kolesárová, 2012). The knowledge of this situation will feed back down to the children and parents and impact on how well the children engage with education. As the Headteacher of Bystrany Elementary School says, it is so hard for her and her staff knowing that no matter how hard they work with the children, they will end up unemployed if they stay in Slovakia.

The final aspect to consider is Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem and the impact of time on the developing Roma children. During the first two years of the project, we have seen the UK move from membership of the EU, to voting to leave in the



next couple of years. The Roma have taken full advantage of the right to move to Sheffield to work, live and educate their children and now they are faced with uncertainty as they wonder if they will be able to stay. It is reported that some families have already moved back to Slovakia because of the Brexit vote, thus interrupting the children's school studies. To put this in context in relation to Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem, those Roma children who went through the English education system between 2004 and 2017 will have had a different experience to those who started their English education pre-Brexit and will conclude it, or not, post-Brexit.

## Section 8: CONCLUSIONS

My overarching hypothesis is that, genotypes notwithstanding, the level of development of a village and context of upbringing has an impact on the academic potential of a child. This has been supported by the data in relation to the two villages, demonstrating that the pupils from Žehra have struggled to attain academically, whereas a higher proportion from Bystrany has managed to succeed across the three levels. The more tangible of Bronfenbrenner's microsystems and mesosystems in both Bystrany and Žehra are indicative of developmental levels, with Bystrany having simply more 'going on' than Žehra, with a greater intensity of building work, renovation and a sense that the settlement, whilst geographically on the edge, is in fact an integral part of the village. One key to development in Bystrany appears to be the well-managed school, in the words of the Headteacher: "I will achieve a 100% pass rate with these children if they have not been to England..." (Interview: 22/4/16); the strong school-home link is instrumental in the development of the child. What requires further research is the 'hidden' proximal processes, those more immediate and early interactions between mother/caregiver and baby and the close proximal processes in those crucial early years of development. It would seem that such processes are either well-established in the homes of Bystrany to some degree, or perhaps lacking more in the homes of Žehra. And reflecting the point made above, a crucial intervening event in many of the children's lives is the migration to Sheffield, which may have a limiting effect on educational outcomes.

One could argue that it is shocking that children can go through school and come away with nothing, at least on paper. I think questions need to be asked of educational policy makers and school leaders. I think seeking to identify the proximal process and interrelated mesosystems that boost child development in marginalized Roma communities would help us to better support the Roma families to maximise their children's potential. My view is that something has to be having a positive effect in the context of Bystrany, whereas the opposite may hold true in Žehra. But I also realize that apart from the evidence presented here,



much of this research is problematic. Each child participant is an individual bundle of genes (genotype) and product of his or her own family, wider family, village and community context (phenotype). Even within Bystrany and Žehra each child will have a unique experience- consider for example, the three basic types of accommodation within Žehra. The character of each child in terms of its 'demand', 'resource' and 'force' characteristics ensures this uniqueness of experience. Any attempt to isolate these multitude variables is fraught with problems. And what of the key early proximal processes, those first interactions between mother and child, and the subsequent development of that child, how can we ensure we capture these for analysis? And how much stimulus of what type and for how long is sufficient to maximise cognitive potential? The answers are not easy, I would argue, but when it comes to ensuring better outcomes for the Roma children, we need to pursue them.

Whilst I would not venture to argue that the results of this research could be necessarily generalised to the wider population, I would suggest that certain trends apparent here might be observable elsewhere. The Roma children at the heart of this research have, for the most part, struggled academically, have wrestled with school education in a language that is not their own and have often come from lower and more marginalized SES backgrounds. This will be a familiar picture to many professionals and academics working with and for the Roma both here and in Slovakia, and beyond. There are Roma families and children living in territorially marginalized settlements in Slovakia, and those living closer to or within the majority population. Some of the contextual detail of the Bystrany and Žehra Roma will also be familiar or 'relatable' to those working with the Roma in other communities. One final point to make is that children in the UK from low SES backgrounds *whatever* their ethnicity, may also find school a struggle, have language and literacy issues and not attain the highest grades. Therefore, professionals and academics working with children in lower SES environments may find much that resonates in this paper.

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