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School life on the margins: Slovak Roma pupils negotiating education

MARK PAYNE

Abstract: Building on the work of Chris Searle in this journal, the author draws on an ethnographic study of a Sheffield school to examine the experiences of Slovak Roma children in the first year of secondary school as they negotiate prevailing English-only language ideologies and complex curriculum challenges and attempt to fit into an educational framework that is trying to adapt to the forces of migration and super-diversity. Struggling to engage academically, pupils are banished to the bottom sets where they are fed a watered-down curriculum. It is argued that the Roma pupils in this situation are in the exclusionary ‘ante-room’; unable to rise through the academic system, weighed down by lack of English language, an alien culture, non-white skin colour and the lack of various forms of capital prized by schools, the next logical step for many is temporary or permanent exclusion. This article sheds light on those pupils at the bottom of the heap for whom chances are curtailed, and adds to debates about xeno-racism, exclusion and class-biased pedagogies.

Keywords: Basil Bernstein, Chris Searle, exclusions, language repertoire, Roma, schoolchildren, Slovak

Introduction

Educationalist Chris Searle, in his 2017 article in this journal, drew attention to the ‘scourge of Roma school exclusion’ and highlighted the shocking number of pupils in Sheffield who were being educated outside of mainstream school provision:

in 2015 there were 567 school students in Sheffield schools whose cohort characteristics are described as ‘white Gypsy Roma’. In the same year, 148 of these school pupils had been excluded from school, over a quarter of the total school number.¹

Searle sets this figure against increasing numbers of school exclusion nationally for all pupils: 2012-13: 3,900 pupils excluded; 2013-14: 4,950; 2014-15: 5,800. He put the Roma exclusions down to various contributing factors: a lowering of the ‘last resort’ school exclusion threshold coupled with greater exclusionary powers for head teachers; the neoliberal nature of the erstwhile competitive state secondary school/academy with its eye on the school league tables and itself under close surveillance by the forces of the school inspectorate Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education); and a continuance of racist ideologies traced back to the treatment of inner-city African Caribbean children (and their families) in the 1960s and before, who were classified often as ‘Educationally Sub-Normal’ and disproportionately separated from mainstream education.

Then, as Searle argues, this inherently structured and institutional racist ideology was to some extent countered by an increase in anti-racist campaigning, multicultural legislation and the establishing of language

and education services for both the arrivant children and their families, embodied for example in English language classes for adults and the recruitment of ESOL and so-called community language teachers, as well as the provision of funding for translation services, educational psychologists and a wider ‘supportive hinterland’ of services. This supportive infrastructure has since been depleted and thus the Roma pupils and their families find themselves trying to navigate through school and society without this depth of support. Linked to the above, and the main argument that runs through Searle’s powerful article is the rise of ‘xeno-racism’ a term coined by A. Sivanandan to mean ‘a form of non-colour-coded racism’ with a simplistic ideology of ‘our own people first’ and often structured in implacable institutional forms. Searle highlights the rise of this form of racism against the backdrop of the EU Referendum and the rise of shocking hate crimes (including murder). The Slovak Roma children are being squeezed on many fronts and it is testimony to their resilience that more are not excluded from school.

To examine the situation of the Roma children and build on Searle’s work, I present one day in the life for 11-12-year-old Slovak Roma pupils in the bottom set of one secondary school. I see the children in the bottom set as occupying a precarious space – they can’t usually be readily promoted up and out of the bottom set (regardless of ethnicity and first language) - school structures are too rigid, they’re losing curriculum ground daily and slipping ever further behind anyway. In falling behind, they often become increasingly disillusioned, realise that they’re going to get little out of their schooling and can tend to act up, truant and be eventually temporarily or permanently excluded, thus representing those marginalised and excluded students that are the subject of Searle’s work. I would argue that it is ultimately the implicit institutional racism of such

sifting and sorting school structures at work that sees the bottom sets occupied by predominantly Roma and other English as Second- or Additional Language Speakers (ESL/EAL), rather than some inherent lack of intelligence or ‘ability’ in the pupils. One aim of this piece is to flesh out some of the detail of what life is like for the Roma Slovak pupils inside one secondary school, and what might in turn be contributing to those increased numbers of children ending up outside of mainstream schooling. I do not claim that all children occupying the bottom sets of our nation’s schools are going to be excluded. Nor would I dare to claim that there are not opportunities for them to rise through the ranks and eventually achieve top set status. But I would point to the inevitability that when children are sorted according to attainment (schools refer to it as ‘ability’), they are also sorted inevitably for English language competence, ethnicity and class²; in order to visit my Roma research participants it is the bottom sets I needed to visit. And even if they rise through the ranks at school, this will not guarantee a Slovak Roma child equality of opportunity compared with a white middle-class child once they leave; the white middle-class child in the UK will always have the advantage.

According to Searle, ‘life at the very bottom of the education system continues to generate as much pain and rejection as it ever did’. I want to present a more detailed picture of what that ‘pain and rejection’ might look like. In highlighting the consequences of exclusion, Searle points to the fact that ‘these children rarely meet and befriend, on a day-to-day basis, young people from any other community but their own, as they would do if they were still at a mainstream school.’ However, due to the nature of the ‘setted’ school structure which sees ‘high ability’ children in the top sets and ‘low ability’ children in the bottom sets,

Roma children find themselves mainly occupying those classes where there is little opportunity to learn alongside non-Roma pupils. Whilst they may get the opportunity to meet and befriend children from other communities at, say, break or lunchtime, in-lesson contexts can be a predominantly homogenous Roma affair. Making another point, Searle argues that in denying Roma pupils the right to attend schools they will not ‘learn, socialise, form friendships and achieve academic success’. However, my evidence shows that even those attending school regularly are highly unlikely to attain ‘academic success’ much beyond a small clutch of very basic Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications.³ And Sheffield City Council statistics back this up: ‘Proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at A* - C including maths and English...Gypsy/Roma pupils 2%... Boys 0%.. Girls 3%.’⁴

Whilst not all those children occupying the bottom sets are necessarily on the way out, i.e. will eventually be excluded, I would argue that in already occupying the bottom tier of the school structure, there is nowhere else to go; the odd child may rise through the seemingly meritocratic system, but most won’t. In my experience it is much easier to move downwards than upwards. And whilst exclusion is normally a result of extremely serious negative behaviours on the part of those excluded, or a cumulation of several lower-order offences, an overall lack of academic progression and a realisation that school is simply not working out, that academic success is remaining elusive, can often result in frustrations boiling over, so-called ‘behaviour points’ accruing and fixed-term (temporary) or permanent exclusion inevitable.

This article draws on exploratory ethnographic research data from a five- year longitudinal study tracking the progress and development of a

Year 7 (ages 11-12) Slovak Roma cohort in a Sheffield school. The study also lies at the nexus of several areas of research. It draws on pupil voice research, which focuses on pupil agency and issues of democracy, power and school change,⁵ research on spatial repertoires which shows us how language use is reflected in the spaces in which it is used,⁶ and is in turn situated within educational and pedagogical research in relation to curriculum, styles and modes of teacher practices in the classroom and the pedagogical policies driving the processes.

The sociopolitical context cannot be ignored. The school in question is an Academy, a quasi-independent state school that is part of a larger Academy chain. This means that whilst central government has sought to free the schools up from local control by passing budgets directly to schools, there is an increased level of policy input from the Academy leadership, which has resulted in greater scrutiny and control. The need to be increasingly competitive sees those less able to compete fall to the bottom, both in terms of schools in the league tables and pupils within schools, as in the case of the bottom set Roma. As the Roma are already on the margins in so many ways in eastern Europe, they do not arrive with those prized varieties of capital so valued by schools operating in the market, and thus are already at a disadvantage.

The school and Slovak Roma

Parkview, a comprehensive secondary school in Sheffield located in one of the most deprived wards in the country, could be described as a typical multicultural, multilingual and multi-faith school. It is an urban inner-city school of approximately 1,000 pupils in the age range 11-16, some 35 per cent of whom have English as an Additional Language.

Applying UK census terminology, about half of the pupils at Parkview are ‘white British’, with the two second largest groups being ‘Pakistani/other Asian heritage’ (11%) and ‘Roma/Eastern European’ (10%). The remaining pupils are of various ethnic backgrounds, with some 20+ countries represented in the school pupil body, reflecting the ethnic profile of the area. This means that there is a range of languages and language varieties present in the school and many of the pupils have more than one variety in their linguistic repertoires.

The Roma from Slovakia began to arrive in the UK from May 2004 as Slovakia gained access to the EU, arriving in Sheffield in small numbers in the areas of Darnall, Tinsley and Page Hall, and today there are approximately 3,000 in the area of Page Hall, a particular locus for the Slovak Roma community. This critical mass of people from a handful of Eastern Slovakian villages has changed the character of Page Hall, as reported in the media⁷. Various issues are perhaps common to many low-rent residential areas: poor quality housing, overcrowding, noise and litter in the streets. It is obvious, also, that new languages have been inserted into the area – Slovak and Romani in particular. The Slovak Roma people and their languages occupy now the recent sociolinguistic ‘substrate’. Romani is heard widely in the area but not seen; it is invisible as a written form. There is some evidence of written Slovak aimed at the Roma, usually in the form of notices displayed in the window of the local Pakistani Advice Centre advising on, e.g. mothers’ meetings.

Schools in the area have encountered problems in terms of welcoming and integrating the pupils and addressing the language issues. That said, the area is one of inward migration going back many years; the schools have been for some time multilingual. However, it would seem

that the combined issues of lack of prior formal education, displacement due to migration and lack of English language skills for many of the pupils means that Parkview has struggled to adapt.

Supporting theory

This research is situated in the broader field of multilingual education and allied with critical pedagogy that seeks to alleviate the educational plight of the poor and marginalised; i.e. those ‘minority’ pupils at school who have less economic, cultural or social capital than is required to be able to engage effectively with the school curriculum and fulfill the teaching and classroom expectations. These pupils are often those that have migrated into the school from elsewhere, have a different first language or mother tongue from the medium of instruction and also include those that we still term as ‘white working class’ or underclass, despite the construction of new categories such as ‘Semi-routine/Routine occupations’ and ‘Never worked and long-term unemployed’; a middle-class/working-class binary has endured.

If we focus on the pedagogical and curriculum structures of schooling and view the Roma as part of the wider ‘working-class’ cohort, then it is relevant to examine Basil Bernstein’s work on language, knowledge and pedagogy, and how the working classes may draw on a restricted language code that necessitates an implicit understanding of context, as opposed to the elaborate code of the middle classes which is ‘universal’ and explicit. Bernstein argues that middle-class children are exposed to this more elaborate code from an early age – and, coupled with the home acting as a second site of pedagogic acquisition, it converges with the type of language and expected behaviours of the

school which sees the middle-class child ultimately more school ready and more adapted to acquire the curriculum.

He goes on to argue that the pedagogic practices embodied in what is being taught, why and how, privileges middle-class interests and children and disadvantages marginalised, poor and working-class children. (In England this is embodied in the National Curriculum for schools, which was launched in 1988 after being designed by a team of experts for each subject area. The personnel on each of those teams can be seen to embody the values inherent in that selected 'knowledge', and those members were middle-class, invariably white, mainly male who themselves had most likely been through selective education and held a view as to what sort of society education should be contributing towards.)

For Bernstein the way knowledge is framed is key. External framing is the tightly regulated governmental educational policy that impacts upon what is taught and when – such as the National Curriculum with its individually bounded subjects, knowledge and skills. In strong internal framing, the teacher can have explicit control over the instructional aspects of selection, sequencing, pacing and timing and criteria. In the weaker internally-framed model, the pupils have some control over the regulative discourse (think more pupil-centred approaches to learning), there will be a less hierarchical and more horizontal social order and lessons will be characterised by more open-ended tasks, collaborative work and open questions that also seek to relate the classroom work to the lives of the pupils. Although it would appear that a weaker framed model would suit the more marginalised pupils, Bernstein argues that both the stronger framed and weaker framed models privilege the middle classes, with the stronger framed model

allied more to the interests of the ‘traditional’ working class. For in a weaker framed environment the middle-class child will still be able to cope, and no matter how sympathetic the regulative discourse, sooner or later the pupils will come up against standardised assessments, which will privilege those who could have kept step with the stronger-framed regulative discourse. It would seem that a combination of the stronger and weaker framed regulative discourse combined with a critical pedagogy that provides space for the experiences and voices of the various pupils can have positive effects in terms of educational outcomes. However, a relaxed-framed environment can pose issues for lower socio-economic status (SES) pupils.⁸

Bourne, in her study of emerging radical visible pedagogy, researched a lower SES school attaining consistently high examination results relative to other similar schools. The teacher embodied the mixed-pedagogies view of teaching for social justice, which combines the rigorous examination of the teaching resources with the space for pupils to contribute in constructing the lesson.⁹

What are the issues for the bottom set? A day in the life

The struggle at Parkview seems to be rooted in many aspects of the school policies, processes and classroom pedagogies that appear to militate against the academic progression of the Roma and bottom set pupils, which could be considered structurally racist. I will focus on one day that I spent in the school (March 15 2016) during which I followed a class around and observed all the lessons. This was a Year 7 ‘lower ability’ set 5 class of twelve pupils: seven Slovak Roma, two White British and three Arabic speakers.

The curriculum they received, the pedagogical style of the teachers coupled with permitted language practices in the classrooms and knowledge of their second site of acquisition (the homes and families) had led me to the view that this class of 11-12 year-olds would achieve academically very little in the year, never mind when they sit (if there are allowed to), high stakes GCSE (16+) examinations. To follow the data extract below, one needs to be aware of the school's increasingly elaborate behaviour management system: there is a set of disciplinary steps in the form of warnings (Consequences), C1 to C3. A pupil can work their way up through these and, following their application, the on-call teacher is summoned, a senior teacher with a walkie-talkie and high visibility jacket, who removes the pupil in anticipation of a detention, or takes them directly to the 'isolation' room, pending further punishment steps. Surprisingly, at least to me, the isolation room can hold about twenty-four pupils, all working in silence in separate cubicles (desks with front and side screens) under threat of more sanctions, and overseen by at least two teachers from a raised dais.

The text box (Box 1) paraphrases one day following the lower set pupils around and shadowing their lessons.

Box 1:

Vignette: a day in the life

P.1: The day of six 50-minute lessons begins with maths – numeracy apparently as the teacher says ‘it is not proper maths’. A series of six sums on the board, pupils work through in silence, no pair or group work, constant threats hanging in the air. Some closed questions, answers provided by the pupils, no sense of how pupils have constructed their knowledge. A very teacher-centred lesson, chalk and talk.

P.2: Then ICT, a computer lesson, a bit of individual work on the computer finishing PowerPoints, some watch a video, focus of the lesson unclear, ‘it is not a proper ICT lesson’, according to the teacher, ‘they can’t program, we tried a bit but they couldn’t do it’.

Break time, the Roma children congregate around two tables in the dining hall, loads of chatter in Romani, some Slovak with me, testing me out, the Roma staff are here, lots of laughing, joking, eating crisps, all good natured. It feels linguistically rich; it feels normal.

P.3: Back to another maths lesson, seems like ‘proper’ maths, more fractions, but some wider questions from the teacher – what do you call one over two in your own language? Various answers from the pupils, this is more positive, seeking how they conceptualise ‘a half’. But they don’t have to join in if they don’t want to. No pair or group work, some have not spoken yet.

P.4: Science, lots of loud threats, ‘trusted girls sit at the back’, untrusted ones at the front. Lesson a bit fast for me, planets, solar system, not sure if all the pupils can follow – words like core, extension and challenge are used -- what do they mean? Loads of threats, C1, C2, and ‘on-call’ -calling the Roma member of staff to ‘sort out’ the Roma boys. There is a six-minute activity where pupils can move around the room looking for information, talk to each other, though this talk is micro-managed by the ever-vigilant teacher.

Lunchtime: back to the dining hall, food and chat, banter and laughter, Roma pupils again in their spot, two of the Roma staff and another teacher eat their lunch with them, the naughty boys are also sitting chatting and eating their food. No need for an extraction team here! I talk to a senior teacher about the tightly-framed pedagogy; she puts it down to ‘confidence’, teachers ‘scared of losing control’ if they let pupils talk or act autonomously.

P.5&6: After lunch it is double English. First the library to sit an online English reading test. I help one of the Roma girls who can’t read some of the long-winded questions before choosing the multiple-choice answer, one from three. She keeps timing out; as the clock winds down she simply pushes any button. Then back for a reading comprehension, tables pushed together, a good sign. But no, teacher takes pupils through, tells them which bit to read, asks a question then promptly tells them the answer. The threats are there, C1, on call, stop swinging on your chair, stop tapping your pen. I ask her about the class at the end, she says ‘they have poor language skills, their English isn’t very good, they can’t do plays, we read one page and I gave up, it wasn’t going anywhere’. I hear afterwards that she doesn’t have a

Analysis

Considering language first of all, it has been argued that ‘multilingual speakers decide who they want to be and choose their language practices accordingly,’¹⁰ although that would assume that pupils have the freedom to make such choices, but as James Simpson states: ‘in educational contexts there is a lack of recognition of the realities of urban multilingualism, and a consequential lack of understanding of how multilingualism can be harnessed as an educational resource’.¹¹ Apart from one lesson where the teacher tried to explore a maths concept in ‘your own language’, this has been corroborated in the vignette; what we seem to have are children who are ‘repertoire primed’ with multilingual resources at their disposal, being forced to use English (or nothing) when invited to participate actively. If the teachers do not begin to harness the pupils’ linguistic and cultural capital, they will not enable the pupils to reach anywhere near their academic potential.

Drawing on Pennycook and Otsuji’s work on metrolingual multitasking and ‘exploring local language practices in relation to space and activity’ where ‘linguistic resources, everyday tasks and social space are intertwined’¹² one sees that there are two contrasting linguistic spaces apparent in the vignette, the classroom and school canteen. In the canteen, the coming and going of the pupils, the calling out, negotiating where to sit, with whom, what to eat, how, what to drink and the ongoing discussions in Romani, Slovak and English (often at the same time) both on and across tables, including the various teachers, Roma staff (and me), embodies metrolingual multitasking in a particular space. The space is multilingual and arguably ‘urban’ in that it is situated within a multilingual school within a superdiverse part of the city. Although not a pedagogic space, it appears to be the opposite of the classroom, with

pupils, including the often-extracted ‘naughty’ ones, sitting with and talking to the teachers. Pupils exercise a degree of self-control; they instinctively queue for their food with little teacher direction. There is no threat of a C1 or imminent extraction.

Within the classroom, and only just along from the linguistically bustling canteen, there is a different space, one that contains many of the same pupils with their rich linguistic tapestries and yet often marked by near silence. There is clearly a tightly internally framed pedagogy that is embodied in a teacher-centred approach to learning infused with strict disciplinarian management of the children that militates against the creation of a space to ‘language’. There is little space for pupils to contribute, period.

In terms of a strongly framed instructional discourse, we sense the external framing effects of the ICT (Computing) curriculum. It does promote coding and so pupils in Year 7 should have begun to learn to code. We may also sense the urgency of pacing here: ‘we tried a bit, but they couldn’t do it’. One could argue that the bit they tried did not result in the expected (for the teacher/school) outcomes and instead of adjusting the pacing and spending more time on it, perhaps engaging in it from a critical pedagogical perspective, the teacher simply moved the pupils on. It should be noted that many of the Slovak Roma pupils have access to a smartphone or computer at home, some frequently visit the local library to go online; they bring a degree of prior knowledge to the subject. In the technological and digital age, one could argue that Computing as a knowledge and skill is crucial in the future lives of children.

As a key core subject there is evidence of strong external framing in terms of the English curriculum, and in particular in developing a love for reading and the study of plays:

Pupils should be taught to: **develop an appreciation and love of reading**, and read increasingly challenging material independently through:

- reading a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, including in particular whole

books, short stories, poems and plays with a wide coverage of genres, historical periods, forms and authors. The range will include high-quality works from:

- English literature, both pre-1914 and contemporary, including prose, poetry and drama
- **Shakespeare (two plays)**
- seminal world literature¹³ (Author's emphasis)

One English teacher was quite disparaging of the Roma children in terms of their language skills and had obviously moved the pupils on from reading any plays after just one page: 'they have poor language skills, their English isn't very good, they can't do plays, we read one page and I gave up, it wasn't going anywhere'. This bears repeating: this key component of the core English Curriculum is to be denied these children after just a one-page(!) experience very early on in their secondary school careers. This also evidences a very fast pacing in terms of moving quickly through the content, although the content is barely touched considering that the National Curriculum states that two plays should be read between the ages of 11 and 14. It is hard to imagine how truncated pupils' school careers would be if every teacher took this approach –if a child doesn't understand something, forget it and move on! Closer analysis reveals an

implicit ‘othering’ of the Roma: *they* are different to us, *they* can’t read plays... This teacher’s attitude towards the Roma overrides any intuitive attempt at pedagogical or language support to try and enable these pupils to engage with the world of Shakespeare – a figure alien anyway to the Slovak school curriculum. Furthermore, Shakespeare is a very middle-class interest – and certain pupils from the middle classes may well be familiar with his works before starting secondary school, thus increasing the gap between those at the top of the system and those at the bottom.

It was difficult to determine what curriculum the pupils were following in maths as they had either maths or extra numeracy both timetabled. I would argue that this indicates a weaker framed instructional discourse; the boundary between maths and numeracy is blurred. The pre-packaged numeracy exercises evidence external framing as they were not produced in-house. Therefore, they have not been designed with the particular pupils in mind, rather, they evidence a ‘one size fits all’ generic resource.

There is, paradoxically, evidence of a weaker framing within the vignette in that the teacher is free to modify the Computing curriculum, in that she does not proceed with the programming aspect of the curriculum. The opportunity to modify or pursue an alternative to conventional practice can give rise to compensatory strategies intended to redress the balance in favour of marginalised or ‘high poverty’ pupils. However, the school and teacher have used this as an opportunity to disapply the pupils altogether from the National Curriculum. Though, as already stated, the National Curriculum is optional for Academy schools, of which Parkview is one, the rest of the pupils taking computing presumably follow the curriculum. This is mirrored in the English classroom, where ‘plays’ were

introduced and swiftly withdrawn, and in maths, where numeracy takes the place of ‘real maths’.

The theme of disapplication comes through strongly I would argue, and was also echoed on another occasion in teacher interviews, where I was told: ‘we put them off doing Geography, they can’t do it’, and ‘they can’t do history, they can’t grasp concepts’ (there’s that othering *they* again..). So, some Slovak Roma pupils appear to be disapplying from History and Geography, not allowed access to programming in Computing nor allowed to read Shakespeare, and not provided with the full curricular maths provision due to the requirement to do extra numeracy (notwithstanding the fact that numeracy is also important).

The pacing of lessons is most salient in the Science class. This evidenced a strongly framed and fast sequenced lesson that was difficult to keep up with, both for the pupils and me. The ‘delivery’ (for that is what it was) of the lesson was by teacher-led PowerPoint slides, most of which were text-heavy and contained three additional text-boxes, each of which was filled out with the aims for the various ‘abilities’ in the class. The pupils were required to listen to the teacher and try and decode the slides at the same time. There was little ‘preparation’ to engage the pupils, and no attempt to determine pupils’ prior knowledge, either before or during the lesson.

Finally, I turn to the role of discipline. The first maths (numeracy) lesson saw threats of C1 issued, threats of summoning the on-call teacher and the class atmosphere was oppressive. The computer lesson was lighter in this regard; there was no evidence of such threats– perhaps the looser framed approach helped. The second maths lesson, whilst strongly

framed in that the teacher followed a plan to teach fractions, allowed for some pupil involvement as they were invited to say what ‘one/over two’ or ‘a half’ was in their own languages. This was a clear attempt to connect the classroom with the outside and with the everyday lives of these pupils. However, the Science lesson was the most oppressive of them all with a lot of threats issued and a lot of shouting on the part of the teacher. The pacing was very fast and militated against many of the pupils keeping up. The final double lesson of English was also quite discipline heavy with more threats of the C1 and a lot of low-level intervention to stop pupils leaning back on their chairs or tapping their pencils.

To sum up: what we have seen here is the varieties of language that Roma children have are not being utilised as a resource in classes; on the contrary, they are being suppressed. But if good teaching is premised upon building on pupils’ prior knowledge, then we cannot see that prior language knowledge ignored. There is a strong sense that the language of the pupils and the pedagogy applied in the lessons of the pupils in question is being restricted; the curriculum is being narrowed in both number of subjects -the opposite of the ‘broad and balanced curriculum’ that the National Curriculum was designed to be - and in terms of the pedagogical space it allows for autonomy, group learning etc. beyond teacher-centred ‘delivery’.

The pedagogic discourse at Parkview is questionable on a number of levels, as evidenced here, both in terms of the instructional discourse, which is at times not only weakly framed but shifts to disapplication entirely for aspects that don’t bring success. The teacher determines this ‘success’ after what can be but brief experiences with content. The

regulative discourse transmits a moral order, one that might link to what are perceived as ‘British’ (code for middle-class) values; there is certainly evidence that ‘they’, the Roma, are othered, *they are not like us: they cannot programme computers nor read plays*. On this evidence, there is much more that could be done to introduce a more critical pedagogy and open up educational opportunities for the Roma pupils and others occupying the bottom tiers of the school system.

This article has fleshed out some of the detail of what life is like for the Slovak Roma pupils in one particular school context. It may well be an experience shared by others as well, both in the Roma community and beyond, and I would be very surprised if it were an isolated case. The article has hopefully shed some light on life in the bottom set in what I call the exclusionary ‘ante-room’ with its limited and potentially limiting educational life chances, one step away from exclusion. It is clear, at least for me, that the pupils at the bottom end of this school system have little real hope.

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