

LIFE IN THE BONDS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION AS A DISADVANTAGEOUS FACTOR OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

Social exclusion is a phenomenon affecting different spheres of an individual's life, and its consequences are seen at many different levels – economic, social, spatial, cultural and others. Life in the bonds of social exclusion is devastating, especially for children. In the field of education, exclusion is becoming a disadvantageous category that indicates a wide range of causes of school failure. The environment from which children come to schools is naturally of great importance for their educational process. It is therefore necessary to identify obstacles that make it difficult for pupils to learn, as well as phenomena that make children potentially or actually fail in schools.

In our research we focus, from a qualitative perspective, on a description of the role of a socially excluded environment, as even a partial determinant that affects the educational path of children who come from such a background. Our aim is to create a complex picture of the barriers that hinder the educational process of pupils and, subsequently, to identify the appropriate areas of support that the pupils need in order to overcome those barriers, and to make them work in the future.

Keywords: Exclusion, environment, disadvantage, pupil, education.

1. Introduction

In Czech social pedagogy, the so-called natural environments of education are traditionally the focus of attention. These include mainly family, school, local and group environments. Current pedagogical research focused on environmental issues extends the range of interests to the work and leisure environments.

One such environment, and from the point of view of contemporary social pedagogy the most important one, is the environment of socially excluded persons. In general, social exclusion is defined as social disadvantage, marginalization, and an inability to access resources, i.e., the marginalization of people with limited access to education, culture, health, sport, employment, etc. However, social exclusion does not only mean that these are poor people. This concept is much broader, and not everyone who is poor is unconditionally socially excluded. Different authors on social exclusion describe and divide it differently. What they agree on is that it refers to a specific group of people who have a specific form of action and behaviour that we call a culture of poverty.

The term 'culture of poverty' emerged in the early 1960s in the United States and referred to a specific culture among immigrants, especially from the Caribbean. The term was introduced to the social sciences by Oskar Lewis. His work on defining a culture of poverty has found followers on the one hand, but has been widely criticized on the other. Cohen (2010) states that the culture of poverty is a concept in social theory that argues that the values of people living in poverty play an important role in maintaining their poverty and maintaining the cycle of poverty between generations. For Harrington (1962), the culture of poverty is a structural concept defined by the social institutions of exclusion that create and maintain the cycle of poverty in America. The culture of poverty not only applies to the United States, but is described in all countries, both developed and developing.

People in a culture of poverty have a strong sense of marginality, helplessness, addiction, and inappropriateness. They are like foreigners in their own country, and they are convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of helplessness, there is a widespread feeling of inferiority and personal inappropriateness.

People in a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are marginalized people who know only their own problems, their own local conditions, their own surroundings, and their own way of life. They usually have neither the knowledge, the vision nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and the problems of others like themselves elsewhere in the world. In other words, they have no class consciousness, although they are very sensitive to status differences (Lewis, 1968).

Skarupská (2016) defined the specifics of the culture of poverty, from which we can choose the main feature of these people, namely a huge passivity. Other specifics include living in the present, narrow cognitive functions, simple language and thus simple thinking and underestimation of education, very weak family ties, and an oppositional relationship with the majority (yet with the expectation that the community will take care of them). Typically, this is a generational transfer.

In the Czech Republic, according to the last survey conducted in 2015 by the GAC agency (Čada et al., 2015), there are 95,000 - 115,000 people, of whom 75% have completed only a basic education, living in approximately 300 socially excluded localities. Children under the age of 15 account for approximately half of them – about 50,000.

According to Czech legislation, these children are in a group of pupils with special needs. These pupils are entitled to support measures (Decree No. 27/2016 Coll.), which are primarily the possibility to use a teaching assistant. The position of teaching assistant is linked only to classroom work. It is not possible to work deeper with a family and cooperate with other support organizations. The disadvantage of this decree is that it is very general and focuses on children across the whole spectrum of specific needs – from gifted children, through children with some type of disability, to children from socially excluded backgrounds.

Therefore, some primary schools located close to socially excluded localities have established the position of social pedagogue, which has a much wider scope of help than just a teacher's assistant. The scope of work of a social pedagogue was prepared by the Association of Educators in Social Pedagogy (2020), and this scope of work gives a social pedagogue very broad competencies, not only for work in the school environment but also for work with families and other institutions, especially with the social and legal protection of children. Unfortunately, the legislative position of social pedagogues is not anchored in the Czech Republic, so whether or not they will work at a school depends on the effort and will of the school principal and, especially, on the will of a founder, because it is necessary to secure funding for this position. Therefore, in addition to its main objective, which is stated in the title of this paper, our investigation also seeks to contribute to the establishment of this position by law.

2. Objectives / methods

In our research project, we assumed that individuals are embedded in the environment and form an indivisible whole with this environment. Their development is naturally conditioned by a number of external and internal factors that affect them in this environment. These determinants are in interacting relationships. Of course, the specific environment with all its relationships influences the educational process of children, so examining the conditions in which students live, explaining the relationship between the environment of students and their education, and describing the student's background itself, are requirements that are reflected in the research of modern pedagogical sciences.

The aim of our research was to describe the role of the socially excluded environment in relation to the educational process of children from families living in such an environment. We aimed to characterize the main pitfalls, problems and obstacles that disadvantage students, from the perspective of both their families and the social workers and teachers who work with the students and their families. Subsequently, we identified the appropriate areas of support that students (and their families) need to be successful in school. The main objective of the investigation was:

- ✓ *To describe the role of the socially excluded environment in a pupil's educational process and subsequently identify the main areas of support.*

In examining the research problem conceived in this way, we leaned towards a qualitative approach. Interviews with pupils, their parents, teachers and other staff who support pupils and families in various areas of life (housing, employment, education, etc.) have become a method of data collection. The following were involved in the research:

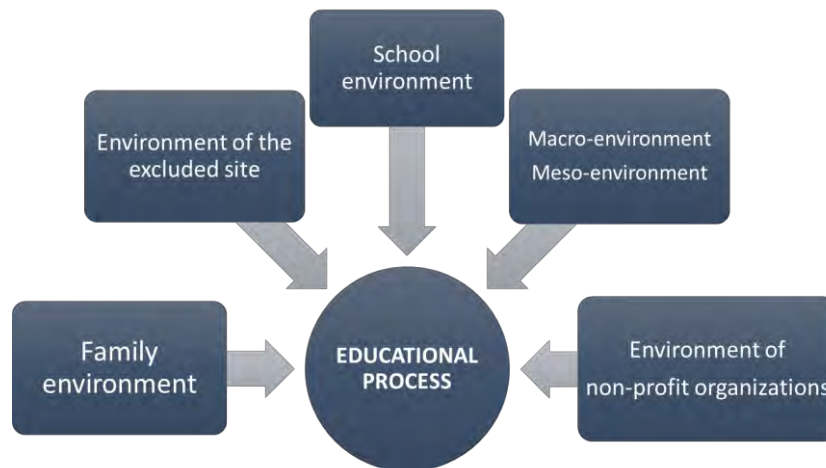
- ✓ 10 families living in socially excluded sites
- ✓ 10 workers with families (5 teachers, 1 career counsellor, 4 social workers with families)

We acquired about 30 hours of recorded interviews. These were then transcribed literally and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. We looked for common topics that the participants talked about and that related to our main research question.

3. Results

From the responses of the research participants, we identified five environments that play an important role in relation to the educational process of students and that affect their success or failure in school:

Figure 1. Determinants of the pupil's educational process.



1. Family environment
2. Environment of the excluded site
3. School environment
4. Macro-environment, meso-environment
5. Environment of non-profit organizations

3.1. Family environment

The role of the family environment was mentioned as crucial for the upbringing and education of pupils by all participants in the research. They clearly identified the role of the parental pattern in the transgenerational transmission of values, life strategies, actions and behaviours. They mentioned that both the parents and their descendants, the pupils, approach education and school in the same way. This is naturally reflected in the upbringing of children and guidance to fulfil their school responsibilities and to learn, in order to make their achievement at school satisfactory and improve their chances for social employment. Those parents, who seek to create a stimulating and supportive environment for the development of the needs and interests of their offspring, are those whose children are more likely to be more successful in the educational process.

3.2. Environment of the excluded site

According to teachers, social workers and parents themselves, a disadvantaged environment, especially a life in social exclusion, is seen as a clearly dominant negative influence in relation to the upbringing and education of children. One of the priorities of families in difficult life situations, and one in which parents invest their efforts and time, is to solve their own existential problems. Naturally, the necessary time investments and efforts in supervising, controlling and helping a child with school duties, as well as efforts to motivate children to learn and continue on their educational paths, are not made, and overall the motivation to succeed in school is low. However, not only external motivation, but also the internal motivation of students in their own educational experience is insufficient. In a socially excluded environment, there are no positive patterns that could be followed by children and young people, no patterns of behaviour that presuppose successful integration into society, patterns of behaviour that support responsible, independent and self-sufficient survival strategies and independence from external sources (e.g., in the form of social benefits or ongoing assistance and support from the non-profit sector). Experts state that the path of social exclusion is also conditioned by the degree of individual effort, resilience to the negative influences of the environment, and the ability to overcome adversity, in the form of various social problems, to ensure optimal social functioning in society.

The environment of socially excluded localities is perceived by research participants from the ranks of experts who work with families as demotivating and lacking in incentives. *Well, I think it's the socially excluded site, that there aren't many of those stimuli, that it's a demotivating environment, and if the stimulus happens to be there, it's more scary and disconcerting (P, 299-301).* They even define it as a socially pathological environment. *... but the problem here is that there is an awful lot of drugs. And those socially pathological phenomena are quite visible here. Now the question is how to eliminate it (I, 13-15).* Together, they recommend not to segregate and concentrate families, especially in large ghettos outside cities; on the contrary, they place hope in efforts to integrate the population into society – within the housing policy of cities and municipalities.

In connection with this topic, experts questioned whether it is possible for the young generation to break free from the shackles of social and economic exclusion. *... It is important for them to be able to get out of that location, of course, to be able to move out of that location, either alone or with their partner, with the one or two children they have. However, they do not see the way. They have no perspective, they have no possibility (P, 356-360).* Experts claim that it is life outside the conditions of social exclusion that models a positive attitude towards education and a higher probability of their success at school.

3.3. School environment

Significant factors influencing the upbringing and education of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds were identically mentioned: pedagogical workers – teachers, educators, workers in leisure activities and others working in the school environment. The importance of the teacher-pupil (or teacher-pupil-family) relationship was pointed out, as was the need for professional non-teaching staff in schools. The principal (Ř, 76-88) called out: *Give me three social workers at the school and I will change the situation!* He also emphasized the need for social workers, educators or mediators in a particular school. As principal, he would have them at his disposal and assign them work, and they would be directly accountable to his management. They would control attendance and absences, oversee school preparation, and be available for negotiations between the students' parents and the school. Experts clearly emphasize equal access to education and the joint education of children from socially disadvantaged / excluded backgrounds with other children. They emphasize the role of the process of integration and inclusion in their future lives. The existence of schools with signs of so-called segregated education, where children from this environment (often Romany children) make up more than 50% of children in a class / school, was unequivocally condemned. Unfortunately, the experience of such schools shows that such schools exist in the Czech Republic, despite all integration and inclusion efforts. They also attached considerable importance in the child's educational process to quality pre-school education for children, lasting at least 2 years. The primary influencing factors in the school environment are, of course, quality teachers, teaching assistants, educators and other staff, who can make the school environment more friendly for pupils and their families and motivate children to develop.

Below is a list of specific individual proposals that the experts pointed out in working with students:

1. The need for trained staff (not only teachers but also other staff with pupils' families)
2. Stricter rules for controlling pupils' attendance
3. Compulsory school attendance up to 17 years
4. Motivationally set methods of working with children and youth
5. The need for strong role models
6. Support for hobby education
7. Not having homework

3.4. Macro-environment, meso-environment

The research participants assessed the cooperation of institutions involved in addressing the integration of socially excluded families into society at the national, regional, and municipal levels as insufficient. There were suggestions for the professionalization of activities and for the effectiveness of cooperation between the state, ministries, city and regional authorities, non-profit organizations and school facilities. In particular, social workers clearly acknowledged the concept of joint education in the form of inclusion and the possibility of supporting pupils from socially disadvantaged or directly excluded backgrounds.

The meso-environment is seen by research participants as motivating and stimulating, especially in the area of positive peer influences. In the naturally friendly ties between children and youth, there is a mutual enrichment and intertwining of cultural patterns, patterns of behaviour and values themselves. However, the labelling of pupils by teachers and classmates still remains a risk, due to visible social differences and low living standards, manifested mainly in the material provisions of children.

3.5. Environment of non-profit organizations

Experts from the non-profit sector spoke very positively about the role of leisure activities in motivating the development of children and youth from socially excluded backgrounds, as well as the role of partial support and assistance to families in specific services (such as tutoring, social activation service, services of a mediator between school and family, and other social services). These weaken the mechanisms of social exclusion and can ultimately lead to better integration into society, to participation in society, and thus to better living conditions. However, with one breath they drew attention to the lack of leisure activities for children and young people from socially excluded families, and to the inappropriate or passive way of spending free time.

4. Conclusions

A socially disadvantaged environment and a life in social (and economic) exclusion is a factor that clearly affects the educational process of pupils. Insufficient support for the pupil's family, the parents' lack of interest in educational results, a lack of motivation to go to school, fulfilling the requirements of home preparation, and a low level of aspiration to continue in the educational trajectory, are all risks that lower the chances of success in the educational process. The so-called culture of poverty and its manifestations are firmly imprinted on the lives of the young generation, which finds itself in their bonds and sees no way out. Models of behaviour reinforced by the patterns of parents and other family members are then reproduced in the lives of the next generation living in social exclusion. In this situation where the basic needs of families are not satisfied, the dominant values are naturally those that lead to survival – the value of life; or more precisely the values of survival – housing, work, life without debt. The most important thing is considered to be a solution to problems, often existential, in everyday life.

From interviews with pupils, parents and experts, we clearly identified the main shortcomings in the support of pupils who are marked by social exclusion. Subsequently, recommendations are made that should be taken into account when addressing issues related to the education of these students:

1. Supporting the whole family in fulfilling their functions with respect to all members, especially children.
2. The need to eliminate insufficient support of a child in education by the family, legal representatives or relatives; insufficient guidance for home preparation or communication with the school.
3. The need to eliminate risky behaviour occurring close to a child, whether it involves various types of addiction, violence or abuse.
4. The need for a multidisciplinary team of school staff (trained teachers, social workers, social educators, psychologists, school-mediators between school and family, etc.)
5. The need for active and meaningful ways to fill free time.
6. The need for functional changes at the state level in the areas of housing and employment.
7. The need to motivate students for their own development and education.

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