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**Slovak Roma students negotiating  
education in England:  
A tale of two villages**

by

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# **Slovak Roma Students Negotiating Education in England: A Tale of Two Villages**

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## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the Slovak Roma community living in Sheffield, a large city in the north of England. It is 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. Despite continued inwards and outwards migration of the Roma population, 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 having over 80% Roma children on roll.

In researching the Roma community, I have been drawn to exploring how Roma children engage with the formal school processes and access the English school curriculum. This has meant investigating such aspects as 'school readiness', literacy skills and language issues, to include the first language (L1) Romani, the L2 Slovak and the efforts now to learn English, for many their third language.

As I have collected attainment data in relation to school leaving examinations for the 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 (see below) and very few are achieving the normative Level Two qualifications. 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? 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 present the data and 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 course, 'nature' plays a major part in cognitive development, the genetic make up of a person embodied in a genotype subsequently develops into a unique combination of genes + environment resulting in a specific phenotype, with the interest for us here being the potential environmental impacts, positive and negative, on the developing genotype (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1998). I argue that in order to understand the educational outcomes of the children from different Roma settlements in Slovakia, one must shed light on the context and character of those settlements and the people living in them. One must also understand where and how the Slovak Roma community now lives in Sheffield. It is also important to explore the school environment to consider the curriculum structure and academic achievement of the pupils, Roma and non-Roma. Bronfenbrenner's (2009) 'Process-Person-Context-Time' (PPCT) analytical model provides a theoretical framework to support the analysis of the project findings.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: in Section 1, I will outline the research project to include the methods, participants and the exemplar case study school. In Section 2, I will turn attention to Eastern Slovakia and the two villages that send the majority of Roma to Sheffield; the villages will be anonymised as Church Village, due to its prominent church, and River Village, due to its proximity to a river, a tributary of the Hornád. In Section 3, I will present the area of Page Hall, which is the locus of the main Slovak Roma population in Sheffield, and examine housing, and social interactions between the Roma groups, and with the local population. In Section 4, the theoretical framework is explicated as a precursor to Section 5, which presents the findings in relation to school achievement. The paper closes with Section 6, where some of the further questions arising from the study are considered.

## **Section 1: The research project and exemplar case study school.**

This paper draws on an ongoing ethnographic study that commenced in January 2013 exploring the Slovak Roma community in Sheffield and in local schools, and latterly, tracking the Roma children through five years of high school education. In accordance with ethnographic approaches, the tools for data collection are semi-structured interviews, observation, fieldnotes, photographs and secondary sources such as school policies, data sets and the corpus of research literature on the Roma. Fieldwork has also been carried out in the source localities in Slovakia. The key participants in this project are those Slovak Roma pupils attending three high schools in Sheffield; data are aggregated to protect the identity of the pupils and schools.

To provide an insight into high school education in England, and a multilingual school working with the Roma in particular, I present Highview School (anonymised), one of the participating schools, as an exemplar case study. As the presentation of a single case, I make no claims to generalizability but there may be aspects of interest relatable to others working in similar contexts (Bassey, 1999). Highview is a high school in the north-east of Sheffield with approximately 1000 pupils. It serves one of the most deprived areas in the country (Sheffield City Council, 2014b) and the number of disadvantaged pupils is twice the national average (Ofsted, 2015, p. 3). Some 35% of the pupil body has English as an Additional Language (EAL) meaning that their first language is *not* English, and in terms of ethnicity, 50% of pupils are white British, 11% of Pakistani origin, 10% Roma, 5% Somali and 20% drawn from some 20+ other countries (Office for National Statistics, 2012). The Roma cohort comprises approximately 100 pupils, predominantly Slovak Roma, with a few from Czechia. They come from the two main source localities of Church Village and River Village (examined below), as well as other villages in Eastern Slovakia, all centred on Spišská Nová Ves in the Poprad-Prešov- Rožňava triangle: Harakovce, Jablonov, Rudňany, Spišská Nová Ves, Spišské Podhradie, Poráč and Spišsky Štvrtok.

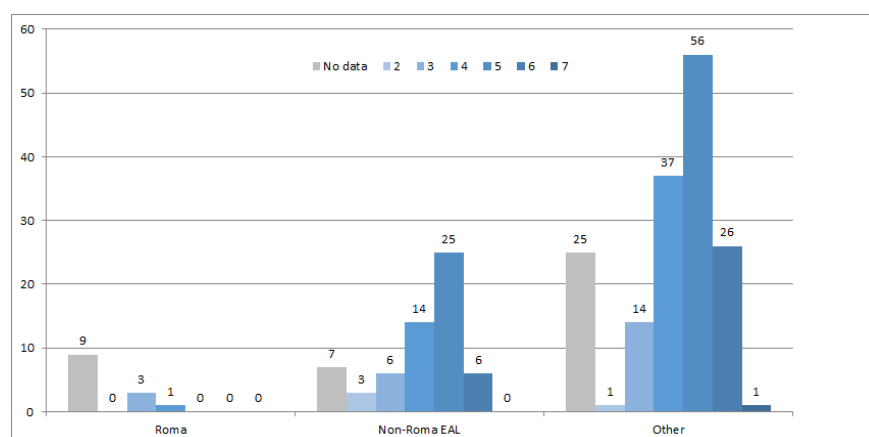
We see the total Roma population rising and falling throughout the year as parents and their children return to Slovakia or travel elsewhere in the UK for shorter or longer periods – sometimes to return to Highview or to be replaced by new arrivals. The words of one Highview teacher illustrate this churn of pupils: ‘...on the Monday after Christmas several new Slovak Roma arrived unannounced’ (Teacher 1: 16/01/15). And this from the headteacher at the High School (Základná Škola) of Church Village: ‘Last week, eight pupils left for the UK and four returned’ (Headteacher ZS: 24/4/15).

Highview is a regular state high school offering the full National Curriculum to potentially all of its pupils. However, apart from the first two years of school when pupils are in mixed attainment classes for many of their subjects, a policy of ‘setting’ the pupils according to attainment is administered from age 13 as pupils study for their examination subjects. This results in the Roma pupils occupying, in the main, the bottom sets, effectively ensuring that the classes are Roma-dominated and thus represent a quasi-mono-cultural environment in what is essentially a multilingual and multi-cultural school; one could argue that a form of segregation-by-attainment is taking place. Furthermore, 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 (see below) and allocated support classes of English accordingly. 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. For example, in NtE1, from a weekly curriculum of 30 lessons, pupils have 27 lessons of English-ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), two lessons of sport and one of art. In NtE3, it is six lessons of ESOL combined with nine different subjects spread across the other 26 lessons, and a regular full timetable (without additional English) sees 12 subjects taught across the 30 hours. The tension between learning English as the dominant language of the host society, and 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 studying mainly ESOL, such

as in NtE1, 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.

In the final part of this section I will present in some more depth the characteristics of the Roma pupils to highlight some of the issues in relation to school readiness that may impact on the ability to engage and succeed in the English school system. 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 ‘osada’, village or town in Slovakia. Furthermore, each child has a unique educational trajectory in terms of attendance (or not) at a day care centre, a kindergarten or pre-primary school (Materská Škola), an elementary/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 cannot speak Slovak, and who instead are often more conversant in English. However, literacy skills in all languages are usually woefully short of target, see for example Graph 1, below, which shows the National Curriculum (NC) level of English reading at Highview school for a sample of the Roma, non-Roma EAL and English native speakers at age 12.

Graph 1. Reading Assessments, recorded as NC Levels in the Y7 summer term



Only four Roma children have managed to score on the National Curriculum reading levels, thus evidencing a lack of skill in English literacy. It should be

noted however that such assessments are designed for *native* speakers of English 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’, but not measurable by these assessments. To conclude, language and literacy skills are crucial for formal schooling and through a combination of factors (see below), the Roma children in this study are often lacking.

## **Section 2: Church Village and River Village**

Both villages lie in Eastern Slovakia in the Poprad-Prešov- Rožňava triangle and are situated just 5.83km apart by road, 3km in a direct line. Church Village is a rural village comprising of some 3314 inhabitants, of whom about 2772 are Roma (Škobla & Mušinka, 2014). The main part of the village centres on the substantial church with the Mayor’s office situated prominently opposite, the village store is nearby, and up the hill is the first of two schools, this one focused on ‘0’ grade children providing Roma children with a crucial ‘catch-up’ year to prepare them for school, in line with Slovak legislation (Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej Republiky, no date). Lining the road towards what I shall refer to as the main High school, the houses consist of substantial, detached, two-story dwellings with red tiled roofs and tended gardens, often extending behind to fruit trees or vegetable plots; these are occupied by both Roma and non-Roma. The joint primary-elementary school is an excellent facility well run by a dynamic, engaged and politically active Romani-speaking Headteacher with many years experience; this school does much to drive the positive development of the Roma children and indeed their families. To the west of the village lies the main Roma settlement, separate but in close proximity, and a 14-minute walk away from the main High school. Within the settlement there are two grocery shops, three sets of three-storey apartment blocks facing to the main square, 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 renovation, new build, in-fill (building houses between other houses where space allows) and expansion – the settlement is spreading southwards, and according to residents, money earned in Sheffield and elsewhere is being reinvested in the homes in Church Village. The context



appears to be one conducive to positive social, economic and educational development and, springing from this, also conducive to physical and cognitive development. Adults and children present as generally clean, neat and tidy, the village is relatively orderly, well-maintained and it seems to be a place the Roma are reluctant to leave when travelling to seek work, and happy to return to and call home. Of course, I am not trying to paint an incomplete picture here; Church Village has its issues and was described back in 2003 as a 'nest of poverty' (Bader & Kunčíková, 2006). Due to the non-Roma leaving as the Roma have spread from the osada to the main village settlement, so the integrated village and village high school have become Roma-dominated. For example, there are just four non-Roma children in the school from a roll of about 650, and in turn, the number of pupils actually in school is around 330, the rest being in the UK and elsewhere. There is a lack of employment in the village, common with many rural communities, and not all the Roma in the osada benefit from remittances sent from abroad.

River Village represents a Roma settlement that has been pushed to the extreme limits of the village boundary – from the heart of the main non-Roma River Village to the Roma settlement it is 1km, with the main village having a population of about 2229 and the Roma settlement having approximately 1744 inhabitants (Škobla & Mušinka, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, River Village refers to the Roma settlement *only*. The village occupies a flat site located in the main between a narrow river tributary of the Hornád and a main road, and can be considered as having three parts: there is the small primary school located across the road from the main village; there is then the main locus of housing consisting of 12 units of three-story apartments, arranged in four rows of three, and then four lines of terraced 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 new shop run by a Roma family. The third part of the village is situated back across the main road again and consists of more rudimentary homes constructed of logs or blocks strung alongside the road for about 200-300

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). Within the main settlement the roads are unpaved for the most part, very dusty when it is dry, and the fabric of the buildings is quite poor with bits of masonry missing- I note again: "River Village looks as run down as ever, people hanging around, many children playing in the street, the young ones often filthy (Fieldnote 19 April 2016). A walk through the settlement from one end to the other means crossing the busy road twice, and it is a real hazard –at close of school Roma activation workers patrol the crossing. The primary school is well equipped, complete with pens, paper, toys, activities, play mats a computer, data projector, chairs and tables. It is run by a non-Slovak teacher and her assistant and caters for children to age 6, including provision again for Year '0' (Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej Republiky', no date).

Overall, the context of River Village looks and feels qualitatively poorer than that of Church Village; River contains a lot of people seemingly waiting for something to happen, hanging around. Of course, the children still run around full of energy but it is not the most dynamic of settlements. It is relatively remote, segregated from daily non-Roma River Village life and the busy road carves up the settlement. Beyond primary school years, children have to attend the elementary school in the small town some 3.6km away by road. I have witnessed many children making this journey on foot. For those who cannot take the bus, this militates against full attendance at school. There is a sense that village life is limited – there is little obvious to stimulate and challenge. The River Village child will grow up in his or her immediate context – an apartment, single-story house or wooden/block hut, the latter probably without sanitation. The Roma social worker can only interact with a certain number of families, the non-Roma shopkeeper hands items through a hatch in return for money – hardly conducive to social intercourse, the primary school lies across the road and up a hill so is not the centre of the community, the ZS is over in the next town – in short, many

of the parents may not be interacting with people outside of the close community on a daily basis.

### **The Slovak Roma in Page Hall, Sheffield**

The Slovak Roma started to arrive in Sheffield from May 2004 onwards as Slovakia accessed the EU and settled in the area of the city known as Page Hall, a series of Victorian terraced streets of two- or three-bedroomed houses. It is not clear how many Roma have settled in Sheffield but some 1244 people who took part in the 2011 Census declared themselves as Slovak speakers whom we take to be Roma (Office for National Statistics, 2011), and research conducted with doctors' practices estimate up to 6000 Roma living in Sheffield (Willis, 2016).

A typical home in Page Hall rents for between £450- £550 per month and comprises of a kitchen, sitting room, small bathroom and two or three bedrooms. The family unit usually consists of the father, mother and on average about four children. Most of the homes I have visited have been very basic and functional, the state of repair depending upon the conscience of the landlord and many Roma families have brightened them up with colourful rugs, vases of artificial flowers, colourful throws on the beds and the sofas, and patterned layered curtains at the windows. There will often be family photos displayed prominently and a TV tuned in permanently to a Slovak TV station. I would suggest that life in Sheffield mirrors life in the osada in many ways; the extended families interact constantly, children are in and out freely playing in the streets, and teenagers hang out. There is quite a lot of debris that seems to accumulate in gardens and on the street – rubbish of all kinds, old sofas, rugs and household detritus. Such lifestyles can clash with the social norms of the host society and the Roma do not easily endear themselves to their non-Roma neighbours. What is missing from this social picture is homes filled with toys and activities and other stimuli for children, remarkable given the number of youngsters in some households. Taking a sample of six Roma households in Sheffield, I counted one children's book (a child from River Village), one Slovak language copy of the book of Mormon (treasured by a teenage girl from Poráč), one pedal car (a child from Church Village), one bicycle (being ridden indoors, again a child from

Church Village), one broken doll (a girl from River Village), one small plastic car (a boy from Church Village) and one PlayStation games console (a family from Richnava). If the developing child needs access to and stimulation by various toys, and if such play is vital to the child fulfilling his or her potential, then this aspect is often lacking in Roma households in both Sheffield and Slovakia, mirroring Biro et al's (2009) findings.

Page Hall has also reflected these changes in the local shops – where once there was a launderette there now stands a 'SK Mix Potraviny', a supermarket targeting the Roma community and selling eastern European products from Slovakia and elsewhere. It is not unusual to see children eating Horalky chocolate wafer biscuits or to see a bottle of Kofola on a home visit. Reflecting social issues and changes, signs appear in shop windows and at the local community centre warning against dropping 'Odpadky' (litter) and threat of an £80 fine for doing so, or signs aimed at 'Rómske ženy' advertising Zumba dancing with health awareness talks in relation to smoking, weight loss and tuberculosis.

The relationship between the Slovak Roma and local population is on the one hand symbiotic – for example, the Roma rent properties from local landlords, and on the other, it is an uneasy one that has been highlighted in the media and at one stage resulted in a night-time police curfew. In terms of the landlords, this is a situation where migrants have followed migrants, resulting in a 'layered immigrant space' (Blommaert 2010, p.7). The current Page Hall landlords are, for the most part, Pakistani heritage descendants of those who came to work in the steel works in the 1950s (Runnymede Trust, 2012). Each new layer of migrants needs the assistance of the layer above, and so the Roma have to get along with the Pakistani heritage community. In terms of the wider local Sheffield population, things have been more tricky, with various negative headlines dominating the media, e.g. 'This is a boiling pot waiting to explode' (Pidd, 2013). Negative views are posted on Twitter and other social media and reports of noise and litter have resulted in the police curfew, and a rental housing licensing scheme to clamp down on rogue landlords and 'thin out' the population (by reducing permissible housing occupancy numbers). Page Hall is still a byword

for litter, with little effort seemingly being made to reduce it, both on the part of the residents and the City Council.

In terms of the relationship between residents of Church Village and River Village in Sheffield, I have noticed some telling instances of tension between the two groups. Having already highlighted the contrasting levels of development between the two contexts, it is perhaps unsurprising that the residents of Church Village look down on the residents of River Village. Church Village children often refer to the River children as 'dirty' and 'dog eaters'; whatever lies behind such abuse, it is clear that there is some enmity between the residents of both villages. As a further example, in 'East' Street in Page Hall, there are two households from Church Village on one side of the street: a married couple and the husband's siblings and parents live in one house, and the mother's parents and various members of the extended family live in the other. On the other side of the road live two families from River Village, again related, a brother and his wife and five children in one house and the sister, her husband and five children living next door but one. I have witnessed some of the enmity play out between these two families at first hand. The brother from River Village is always complaining about the rubbish in the street and in his own back yard emanating, he says, from the 'Church Village bastards' (the fact that it could be his own rubbish is not lost on me). The mother of the Church Village family always refers to the 'no good families' on the other side of the street. Both mothers seem to be bickering constantly about the children, who is teasing whom, who is running amok, and so on. Yet these two sets of families still seem to be there, co-existing, neither has tried to move away. Whilst Church and River villages contrast in levels of social and economic development, some of these differences, at least superficially, appear to be ironed out in Sheffield – the Roma from both source localities live in similar accommodation in the same streets, the children attend the same primary and high schools, the parents (usually the men) occupy similar types of employment.

#### **Section 4: The Theoretical Framework**

Much has been documented in relation to the geographic spread and socio-economic status of the Roma community (Škobla & Mušinka, 2014), and various villages and settlements have been studied (Mušinka, 2012; Mušinka & Kolesárová, 2012), with one of the most significant works being the in-depth investigation of Svinia (Scheffel, 2013). Matras has done much to further the work in Roma studies (2015) and Romani linguistics (2002). There has been a specific focus on the eastern European Roma, embodied in the 'National Roma Integration Strategies' report (European Commission, no date) and the progress made by the UK (Lane, Spencer, & Jones, 2014), with Reynolds (2008) focusing on Roma and migrant children. Particularly pertinent, Znamenáčková addresses the migration from Slovakia and the living conditions in the source localities (2008), as did Bader and Kunčíková (2006), Lackova provides a true insider's perspective of both growing up as a Roma woman and going on to attain the highest academic award (Lackova, 2000), Clark (2014) focused on various groups of eastern European Roma in Glasgow and challenges to integration, and Sime et al (2014) researched Roma families' engagement with education and support services, also in Glasgow. New (2014) focused on language issues for Roma in Czechia and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England published a report on the Roma 'Overcoming Barriers' that focused on barriers to learning and was the first official attempt by this body to assess the particular need of this demographic in relation to education and support (Office for Standards in Education, 2014). In relation to the Slovak Roma in Sheffield, Payne has focused on integration in schools (2014), a case study of integration in one high school (Payne et al, 2015), the development of an analytical tool for practitioners working with the Roma (Prieler & Payne, 2015), the work of a joint university-school Roma project (Payne, 2014a) and language planning issues in relation to the Roma in Sheffield schools (Payne, 2016).

In terms of a broader theoretical framework, Bronfenbrenner's 'Process-Person-Context-Time' framework (2005) supports this study in that it considers 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). For example, consider the toys, books, colouring and other activities highlighted in Biro et al (Biro, Smederevac, & Tovilovic, 2009) that are vital in fuelling cognitive development, compared with the 'neglect of intellectual climate' (Biro et al., 2009, p. 284) reflected in the lack of such stimuli.

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 bioecological PPCT system theory framework distinguishes five systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The microsystem is the '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), the family being the key microsystem and the 'stable' family being the ideal in terms of being relatively predictable, including routines such as a nightly bedtime story – and thus conducive to development, rather than a frenetic, unstable and chaotic family life which serves to undermine positive development (Jaeger, 2016, p. 165). The mesosystem is the relationships and links between the

microsystems, such as between the child's home and school, the child's peer group and family, the school and church (or similar), family and church, and so on. The exosystem introduces the wider community and, according to Bronfenbrenner, 'at least one setting that does not ordinarily contain the developing person but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148). The father's workplace is an example cited of an exosystem which can have a positive effect on the child's development, such as through a promotion or pay rise for the father, or negatively, such as from reduced hours or redundancy. 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 cultural traits such as beliefs and faiths 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).

## **Section 5: Findings**

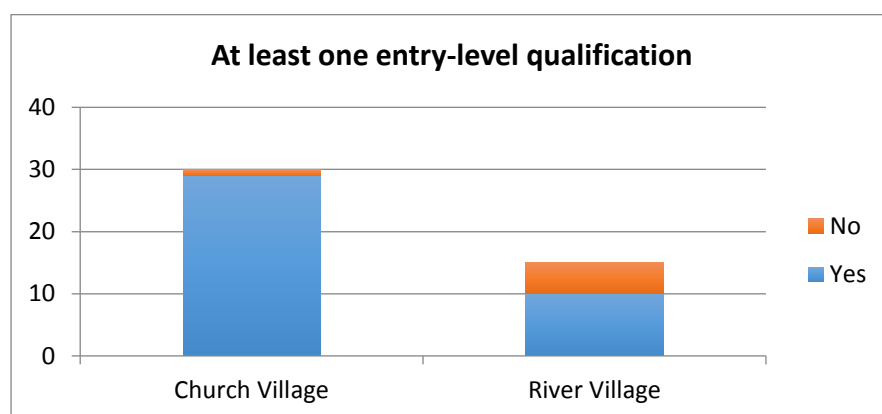
In this section I present the attainment data that prompted this paper and address three questions: 1. How well do the Roma children attain at the end of high school? 2. What differences in attainment are there between the children from the main sender localities? 3. What could account for the differences 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 16. Graph 2 shows the number of pupils gaining a pass at Entry Level, sorted by



Church Village and River Village. 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) and 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.

Graph 2: Attainment at Entry Level

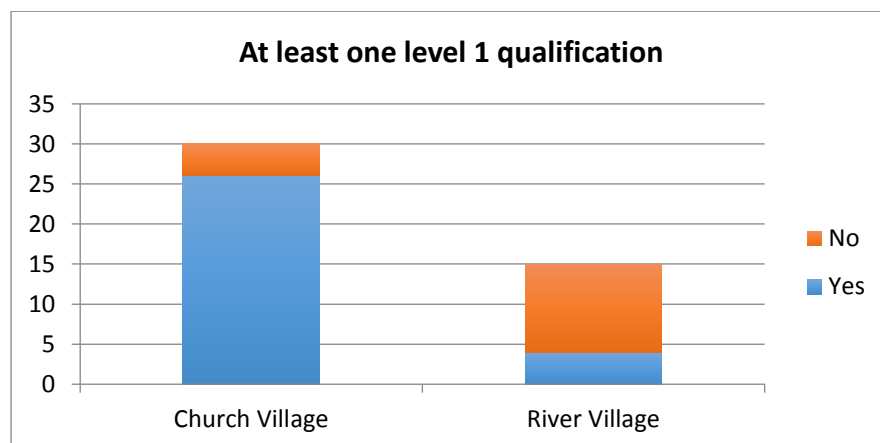


The number of pupils entered for Church Village is 30, with 15 entered for River Village. In total, some 39 children from the two villages have managed to attain an Entry Level award and six in total were unsuccessful. What is evident is that more children from Church (29) were entered than for River (10) and only one child from Church failed to gain the qualification, whereas it was five from River, 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 Church have held their own, some from River have found this level a struggle.

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; Graph 3, below, presents the attainment at Level 1.

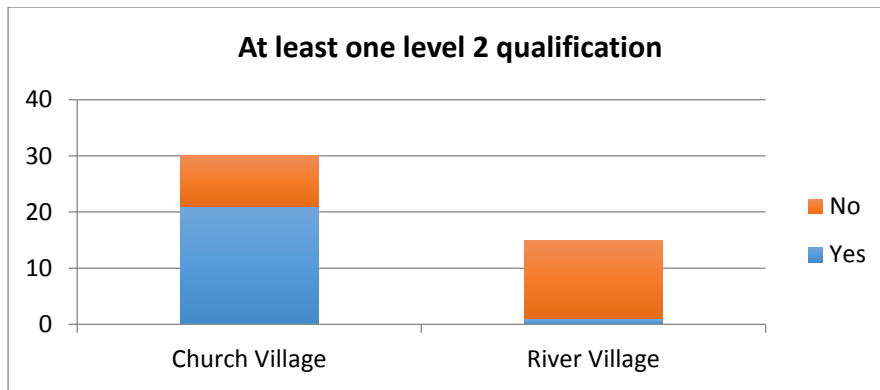
Graph 3: Attainment at Level 1



We see that 30 pupils achieved at least one Level 1 qualification, 26 from Church and four from River. Of the pupils who did not achieve an award at this stage, 11 were from River and four from Church. The increase in academic challenge, albeit still a relatively low one, has highlighted the difference between the two village cohorts with Church outperforming River; in percentage terms 87% of Church attained the Level 1 award compared with 27% from River. In terms of failure, 73% of River has failed to achieve this award compared with a failure rate of 15% for Church. 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).

Graph 4: Attainment at Level 2



With the academic challenge increased further, only one pupil from River has managed to achieve a Level Two qualification and 14 have failed to register a pass grade. For Church Village, 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. Church Village pupils entered for the Level Two examinations have managed in many ways to hold their own, with 21 out of 30 successful pupils to some degree. The data for River Village show that only one pupil managed to register at least one Level Two score, a sad return from 15 pupils entered.

So far in this section we have addressed the first two questions and seen (1) how well the Roma children in this study are attaining and (2) the differences in attainment between the two sender localities. We will now consider research question 3: what could account for these differences in attainment?

Reflecting back on Graph 1, it is clear that the Roma children are struggling with the learning of English as a foundation for their engagement with academic study, what Cummins refers 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, in line with Ofsted's findings (Office for Standards in Education, 2014). Once the pupils do reach the examination stage, all examinations (apart from elements of foreign language ones, such as French exams) 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.

In terms of the differences between the attainment of Church and River pupils, I return to Bronfenbrenner and contexts of development. We have seen that the relatively higher attainers come from Church Village, a microsystem and mesosystem that is, in many ways, an integrated Roma and non-Roma settlement, with the main osada just on the edge 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 Church, with the strong links between parents and school, and also between the Roma community and the mayor and mayor's office, between the church pastor and Head teacher, and the various combinations thereof comprising a mesosystem. The components of the mesosystem in Church Village will be reinforcing behaviours that lead to the positive development of the Roma child.

Contrast this with River Village and the remote, more marginalized lives of the Roma there – there is nothing of the integrated bustling life of Church; whilst I have met the Roma mayor of River Village, there is not a well-appointed Mayor's office centrally located in the settlement, the village shop feels like visiting a small prison 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. Whilst the microsystems of family, primary school, chapel, social centre and apostolic church are present, there is little of the tangible interactions between the microsystems in the mesosystem. It might not come as a surprise then, that the pupils from Church outperform the pupils from River according to our statistics, notwithstanding the questions raised by the three attainment graphs and inherent limitations in the data. As already stated, a breakdown by subject would

be useful to begin to identify what skills and knowledge have been attained by these pupils and which aspects may have proved simply too much to acquire. 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 the Roma children? And within this sample there are some youngsters who have been in England since they were born, some who arrived earlier than others and some who have only been here a short time. Again, we need more information to interrogate the data more closely.

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 to the developing young child in the form of toys etc. (Biro et al., 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 River could be theoretically performing as well as those from Church, but this is not the case. My belief is that the pupils from River 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 who managed to attain the Level Two qualifications and compare them with the home lives of those who did not manage to attain academically. A question emerging from this paper is: what accounts for the differences in attainment between the higher and lower attainers in Church Village and River Village.

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 Church, with many of the houses undergoing some form of renovation, others being built from scratch. It was obvious that the father's work in countries such as the UK, Germany and France, as evidenced by the car registrations observed in the osada, 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 Church Village 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 River village? We know that many families from River are also in the UK and sending remittances home. But the apartment blocks and low-rise houses in the main part of the village do not lend themselves readily to improvements compared with the detached homes in Church. Improvements have been made to some, with some of the low-rises extended front and rear and one having been extended upward. A family is also building a substantial detached home with an adjoining grocery shop. However, instead of engaging in home improvements, the trend seems to be for the better off families to simply move out of the village and relocate elsewhere, such as the town just down the road. This represents something of a drain on social and cultural capital as these perhaps more motivated families move out and leave behind those with perhaps lower social skills. The village loses some of its more aspirational inhabitants who could act as good 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 will have a detrimental effect on the rest of the River Village 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. Although both villages are different, with Church more developed in many ways, the marginalised position of the Roma in Slovak society

and European society more broadly persists. So, despite the best efforts of the children, parents, school, mayor's office, church and so on within the mesosystemic framework, 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. 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 Mrs C of Church ZS 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. In terms of attainment, the aim is to collect the data over five years to build up a fuller picture. 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 that 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 conclude it, or not, post-Brexit – this is the element of time impacting on the processes of human development.

Bronfenbrenner refers to the impact of changes in the environment, such as the birth of siblings, severe illness, going through puberty, 'altering the existing relation between person and environment, thus creating a dynamic that may instigate change' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 119). Again, this will be an individual experience for each Roma child and his/her family, mainly felt within the

microsystem of the family, and points to longitudinal studies as appropriate for studying human development in context.

## **Section 6: Conclusions**

In this paper I have presented the Slovak Roma of Sheffield Page Hall and attempted to shed light on their lives here in Sheffield to include family and school experiences. I have drawn on data from the project schools focusing on the attainment measures from two sets of pupils from Church Village and River Village. 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 River Village have struggled to attain academically, whereas a higher proportion from Church Village has managed to succeed across the three levels; but much remains to be researched. The more tangible of Bronfenbrenner's microsystems and mesosystems in both Church and River are indicative of developmental levels, with Church having simply more 'going on' than River, with a greater intensity of building work, renovation and a sense that the Osada, whilst geographically on the edge, is in fact an integral part of the village. One key to development in Church appears to be the well-managed through school, in the words of Mrs C, "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, the less tangible, 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 Church Village to some degree, or perhaps lacking more in the homes of River Village. And reflecting the point made by Mrs C, 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, whether those outcomes are in Sheffield at the end of high school, or in the high school in Church for the pupils there, or, for the pupils of River Village, the high school in the town down the road.



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 would not blame individual teachers, more the system of which they are a part. 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 Church Village, whereas the opposite may hold true in River Village. But I also realize that apart from the evidence in the three graphs, much of this research is problematic. Each child participant is an individual product of his or her own family, wider family, village and community context. Even within Church and River each child will have a unique experience- consider for example, the three basic types of accommodation within River. The character of each child in terms of 'demand', 'resource' and 'force' characteristics ensures this uniqueness of experience. An 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 on through the development of that child, how can we ensure we capture these for analysis? And in terms of Biro et al's conclusions, how much stimulus of what type for how long is sufficient to maximise cognitive potential? The answers won't be easy but I would argue that, when it comes to ensuring better opportunities for the Roma communities, we need to try.

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